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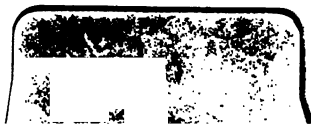




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A CHELSEA HOUSEHOLDER.

"Is it a little thing
To have enjoyed the sun,
To have lived light in the spring,
To have loved, to have thought, to have done?"
M. ARNOLD.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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A CHELSEA HOUSEHOLDER.



CHAPTER I.

BOLDRE FARM BY BOLDRE MERE.

NOR many days after her expedition to the east of London, Muriel received a letter in her grandfather's cramped and laboured handwriting, urging her to come down to Norfolk at once, instead of waiting until the beginning of September, as had previously been arranged. He had been ill all the summer with rheumatism, and one thing and another, he said, and would be glad of some one to stay with him. The Tom Flacks had been over nearly every day, but he didn't want to see the Tom Flacks. He wanted to see her. Could

she come that week ? Muriel was a good deal surprised at this letter. It was quite unlike her grandfather to change his plans ; still more unlike him to complain. It did not, however, occur to her that there was likely to be much amiss. Of course he was old ; he must be nearer eighty now than seventy ; still his strength had always been so wonderful, that it would have seemed to her almost like a contradiction of nature to think of his being ever seriously ill or ailing. Personally the summons was extremely welcome to her. The *désagréments* of her life in London had latterly been almost more than she could bear. If any one had told her six months before that she would come to regard Mrs. Skynner sadly and seriously as a source of real grief and trial to herself, she would have laughed the idea to scorn. Her sister-in-law had always seemed to her a sort of embodied

comedy, quite too inconsequent to be taken seriously—amusing even, if only from her very unreasonableness and amazing capacity for self-glorification. One soon ceases, however, to be amused by any unreasonableness which takes the form of animosity against oneself, and Mrs. Skynner's animosity against Muriel had latterly come to be a very serious and ponderous element in the latter's life. She was weary, too, of the constant struggle, the perpetual sense of antagonism—one which she was well aware was beginning to be aroused upon her own side as well as upon the other's. Over and above all this, she was fond of her grandfather, and extremely fond of the farm, and glad therefore to think that she would see the latter before the summer had quite deserted its orchards and meadows. As she stood with the letter in her hand, the image of the old house, with its weather-

worn mullions and red gables ; the yellow stacks of corn rising in the haggard ; the broad, grey mere stretching beyond the door ; the distant spire of Essant church ; the wide, green stretches of level country ; rose up vividly before her, and she felt a longing to be off and to be there. It did not take her long to make her preparations, and within three days of receiving her grandfather's letter she had arranged all the affairs of her little kingdom, had made her adieux to the Kings and Prettymans, and was driving alone in a cab to St. Pancras station.

She was a little late. The platform was already crowded when she arrived, and the train within a few minutes of starting. Happily she was not much encumbered with luggage, so, with the aid of a willing porter, she was soon established in the corner of a carriage. Another five minutes, and London, with all its hopes and fears,

cares, troubles, pleasures, hindrances, was already beginning to recede into the background.

Once clear of the interminable roofs and chimneys, Muriel's spirits seemed to go up with a bound. All the common sights and sounds of the country—the burnt gold of the cornfields; the long, green sweep of the pastures; the shadows of the crows, sweeping low over to bean-fields; the marshy corners, where the loosestrifes and willowherbs made a glory in shady places—everything seemed to fill her mind with a sort of rapture, a sense of peace and *bien-être*, to which for months she had been a stranger. Near Cambridge they passed a party of people coming down the river in a barge; a happy-looking family group, with fishing-rods and luncheon-baskets. Their voices reached her distinctly for a moment, as the train slackened to enter the station; then it passed on,

and they, too, were left behind. At the next station to this, a small crowd of people were waiting to get into the train, amongst whom were two, a lady and a gentleman, who immediately attracted our heroine's attention. Both were dark, and both young, with a certain similarity about the contour of the faces, and the strongly-marked brows and lashes which proclaimed them to be brother and sister. On a nearer view, the points of dissimilarity proved to be at least as striking, however, as those of similarity. Something in the disposition of the luggage occasioned a short delay, so that she had a good opportunity of indulging her curiosity. The most salient point of difference was that, whereas the brother was decidedly plain, the sister was as decidedly handsome—beautiful, indeed, Muriel mentally pronounced her. She had never seen a face which so completely realized her

dreams of southern, or rather, perhaps, of eastern women. It had all the languor and brilliancy, the mingled fire and indolence that one associates with the idea of a Cleopatra or a Semiramis. The orientalism of this Semiramis began and ended, however, with her face ; her dress being rigidly, and even, as it struck Muriel, studiously and ostentatiously British and unbecoming. A narrow-brimmed hat of the hardest and most uncompromising type covered her head ; her dress was a greenish tweed, the coat and collar cut like a man's ; her hands were encased in the stoutest of dog-skin gloves, and her feet in the most uncompromising of walking boots ; anything decorative or ornamental in the costume of the pair was, indeed, supplied by the brother, whose carnation-coloured necktie and suit of light brown summer tweed were evidently not arranged entirely without an eye to effect.

Muriel had 'a vague impression of having seen the latter somewhere or other before, and that, too, within the last few days ; but when or where she could not remember. While she was still fumbling amongst her half-effaced recollections, her fellow travellers entered a compartment near hers, and the train moved off.

Half an hour later it drew up again, at the little junction where she had to get out to wait for the train that was to convey her to her grandfather's station. Apparently the brother and sister were also bound in the same direction, for they, too, descended, a maid and man-servant hovering obsequiously in the rear. They had not very long to wait. As the train drew up at the platform the door of a compartment was flung open, and a tall black figure sprang down, at sight of whom the brother and sister uttered a simultaneous exclamation.

"Steeny! we thought you must have missed your train."

"No, I came down by an earlier one. I wanted to see a man at Cambridge. Are you? ——"

He had caught sight of Muriel, and, leaving his question unformed, darted across the platform to where she was standing.

"Miss Ellis! you here?" The observation was not a striking one, but the tone seemed charged with meaning.

"Yes, I am going to stay with my grandfather; he has not been well lately, and has sent for me," she answered.

There was no time for more, as the train was starting, and Halliday had only just time to see her into a carriage, and then return to his own, in which the brother and sister (in the former of whom Muriel now recognized the man she had seen a few days previously in Piccadilly) had already taken their seats.

On arriving at their destination, he was again beside her as she stepped out on to the platform.

"Have you any other luggage?" he said, taking up her portmanteau and bundle of rugs and umbrellas.

"No, nothing else. But pray do not trouble yourself to carry those things, Mr. Halliday," she added. "I am not at all used, I assure you, to being waited upon."

"You expect to be met here, don't you?" he said, taking no notice of her last remark.

"Yes, I think so. My grandfather generally sends for me," she answered, gazing rather anxiously down the road, where a large open landau drawn by a pair of prancing bays appeared to be the only vehicle in sight.

"If nothing comes soon you will let my cousins set you home, will you not?"

Halliday said eagerly. "Don't think that it will be out of their way; it will not in the very least."

"Thank you very much, but—ah, there it is," Muriel added, in a tone of relief. "I recognize old Jabez Strong, my grandfather's man."

Halliday placed the portmanteau in the carriage—a clumsy little vehicle of the kind common to small yeomen in remote country parts—and then returned to the platform for Muriel's other possessions, the porters being too much engrossed with the effects of the other and more imposing travellers, to think of attending to hers. When he returned she had already mounted to her place, so that there was nothing for him to do but to deposit his burden on the seat, and stand back to allow her to drive away.

He was still standing in the same spot, when his arm was seized by his cousin.

"The divinity having departed, perhaps you will kindly enlighten a fellow mortal's ignorance on the subject," that gentleman exclaimed.

Halliday turned round. "What do you want, Conroy?" he said, not, it must be owned, in the most amiable of tones.

"What do I want? I want, of course, to know who that young lady is that has just driven away?"

"She is a Miss Ellis."

"Miss Ellis? What Ellis? Any Ellis one knows?"

"I don't know what Ellises you know."

"Don't be so pragmatical. Have some regard, at least, for a man's impatience. Beings like that don't descend at this station every day in the year, let me assure you. Who is she? Where does she come from? Is she going to stay with any one in the neighbourhood? and if

so, what do they mean by sending such a go-cart as that to meet her?"

"She is going to stay with her grandfather, Mr. Flack, who lives at Boldre Farm. As for the carriage, I suppose he had no other to send."

Mr. Beachamp's jaw dropped. "Flack? Boldre Farm?" he repeated. "You don't mean to say that the young lady I just now saw is old John Flack's granddaughter?"

"So I am informed."

"I don't believe a word of it, Steeny. Somebody has been bamboozling you."

"My authority is herself."

"That sounds good, certainly; still I don't believe it. It's preposterous—a perfect subversion of all one's ideas. Whoever saw a farmer's daughter or granddaughter that looked like that, I should like to know?"

To this Halliday made no reply; and,

not caring to continue the conversation, presently turned away and moved towards the carriage in which his other cousin had by this time seated herself.

"Where is Conroy?" she inquired, as he approached. "Do make him come, Steeny. I am in such a hurry to get home. Why will he always dawdle so?"

Halliday was about to turn back to execute this order, when he was anticipated by the appearance of that gentleman, who sprang hastily in; his cousin followed, the footman mounted the box, and the carriage drove off.

"The more I think of that assertion of yours, the more preposterous it appears," young Mr. Beachamp declared emphatically.

"What is preposterous? What are you talking about, Conroy?" inquired his sister.

"Why, Steeny there, that unimpeach-

able cousin of ours, has had the audacity to try and persuade me that the young lady I pointed out to you at the station is old John Flack's granddaughter!"

"John Flack? Do you mean farmer Flack, who lives near the mere where we go to fish?"

"Yes. Did you ever hear anything so improbable?"

"I can't imagine his having a nice granddaughter, certainly."

"There it is! Nice! Why, I don't believe you even looked at her! A perfect Diana! A girl, I assure you, who might be a duchess. Such an air and a walk as I haven't seen since—— Hullo! There she is. Look out now, we're just going to pass her. By Jove! it's a case of the gods going to market. Blessed if she don't look handsomer than ever in that beastly little shay."

All three turned round as the carriage

with the prancing horses swept past the vehicle thus disparagingly alluded to. Muriel happened to be looking in the other direction, but she turned and bent her head slightly in response to Halliday's bow, then the carriage swept on, and she and her chaise remained behind.

"Yes, she is handsome, and looks extremely nice. I shall certainly get to know her, and ask her to come and see us at Chudleigh," Miss Beachamp said with decision.

Conroy whistled. "I should like to see Lady Beachamp's face when you do that," he said.

His sister frowned. "I suppose one may ask whom one likes to one's own father's house," she said indignantly.

"I suppose you may, my sweet sister; and I suppose you'll also engage that her fair ladyship, our youthful mamma, is decently civil to her."

"I don't care whether she is civil or not."

"You mayn't; but I expect this Miss Ellis would. Judging by her face, I shouldn't say she was a young lady who would enjoy being snubbed by any one, even her landlord's wife—I mean her grandfather's landlord's wife."

"She simply wouldn't go," Halliday said decisively.

"There, you see. Steeny, who knows all about her, says she wouldn't go. Come, Steeny, tell us the whole history. There is a history, that I'll go bail. She is engaged to a millionaire, who has had her educated upon some elaborate system of his own, or she has been adopted by some one, or something is in the wind. Come, show us the mystery. Disclose! Disclose!"

"There is nothing to disclose that I am aware of," Halliday said coldly.

"Oh, come, there must be! Where does she live, to begin with? Not at Boldre Farm obviously, or I shouldn't have met you careering down Piccadilly together. Don't be so reticent, man! Tell us the whole story."

"There is no story, I tell you," his cousin repeated angrily.

"Well, who is she, then? Is she one of your district visitors at What's-its-name—that delightful place you live at in the east?"

"No."

"What, then, in Heaven's name, is she?"

"She is an artist."

"An artist? Oh, come, we're getting nearer to it now. What sort of an artist, though? Not a singer, or an actress, or anything of that sort? she don't look like it, at least; moreover, I don't suppose those sort of people are much in your line."

Halliday turned red with annoyance. "By an artist I mean, of course, a painter," he said.

"*You* may mean that, my dear fellow, but other people don't," his cousin responded airily. "An artist no more necessarily means a painter than a soldier necessarily means a Life-guardsman. An artist may be anybody. The man who carved this head on the top of my walking-stick I've no doubt called himself one, or, at any rate, had a perfect right to do so if he chose."

"Does she paint well?" interposed Miss Beachamp.

"Yes, I believe so; Hyde thought so, at least."

"Oh, Hyde knows her too, does he?" exclaimed the unabashed Conroy. "Then, that settles the matter. I must positively go and make her acquaintance at once before he arrives."

"You imagine that she would receive you?" his cousin inquired loftily.

"Certainly—particularly when you introduce me."

"But I shall do nothing of the sort."

"Oh yes, you will. You're a deal more good-natured than you imagine," the other said confidently.

"I shall not show my good-nature in that way."

"Very well; we shall see. Meantime, I don't mind staking my existence that before three days are out I shall find myself basking in the light of those glorious grey—or were they, by the way, glorious hazel orbs?"

To this Halliday vouchsafed no rejoinder. Two years ago he had thought his cousin a most irritating young coxcomb, and he did not feel at all disposed to reverse that opinion now. At present, however, his thoughts were too busily

occupied otherwise to trouble themselves much about Mr. Conroy's vagaries. What was he to do in this totally unforeseen juncture? he asked himself. Should he find some excuse for leaving Chudleigh, and returning forthwith to London, or should he stay and take his chance of what was to follow? a question which occupied him during most of the remainder of his drive, and was by no means decided by the time he reached the house.

Meanwhile, the subject of these thoughts was proceeding soberly along the road, a good mile or so already behind the occupants of the landau. The horse that drew them was a serviceable, well-shaped animal, old, but with plenty of work in it still, and capable, no doubt, of going a good bit quicker than it was doing at present. Old Jabez Strong, John Flack's factotum, had no notion, however, of more than one pace—a steady market trot of some four

miles an hour. As far as Muriel was concerned, she was not at all inclined to quarrel with this leisurely locomotion. On the contrary, she rather enjoyed her slow progression between the green tangled hedgerows, whose haws were already beginning to turn red in anticipation of the yet distant winter. She enjoyed the wide outlook which presented itself wherever a gap occurred, or a line of wooden paling varied the monotony of the hedges; the broad, heathery wastes, thinly dotted over with wide-scattered gorse bushes; the slow, sleepy streams; the fields crossed by straight roads, where an occasional waggon or market cart seemed an event. The sun had gone behind clouds, which covered the upper part of the sky with a solid felting, beneath which long silvery shafts escaped, lighting up the flat green country with a pallid radiance. Now they passed long belts of fir trees, bare of all under-

wood, the red-brown trunks stretching for miles before them in ever lessening perspective ; then a line of sand banks came into sight, where the rabbits were sporting about by hundreds, their brown backs showing for a minute as they disappeared into their burrows. Further off, clumps of red or brownish farm buildings showed dark against the sky, with ladders laid against the stacks of corn, and broad, now nearly denuded, fields, over which the rooks were sweeping in black platoons and squadrons. Now and then old Jabez would give utterance to a guttural "gee" or "go-e," when the brown horse seemed likely to lapse into an actual walk, and once Muriel asked him to stop to let her pick a handful of the honeysuckles, which, with dishevelled-looking bryonies and a few belated foxgloves, still here and there decorated the hedge-bank. At last they came

within sight of Boldre Mere, its grey waters stretching placidly away in the distance, and on the nearer side a church, whose stumpy little tower and shingled roof reflected themselves with much precision upon the surface; then in through a gate, and along a bit of road deep in heavy cart-ruts, until they finally drew up at the door of the farmhouse.

Muriel thought that she had never seen it look so well. The hour of the day and the pale, transparent glow suiting its warm brickwork and lichen-dusted stones to perfection. Apart, however, from any such accidental circumstances, it really was a beautiful old building,—one of the very few of the type still to be seen in any part of England. Nothing, indeed, that neglect or ill-usage could do to spoil it had been spared. The fine, old pointed archway was half filled with sacks of corn; many of the stone transoms which crossed the

windows were broken ; the ivy, which crawled over half the house, was ragged at the base, evidently from the teeth of cattle ; many panes of glass were broken ; many chimney-stacks fallen. Nothing, however, could effectually spoil it, or injure the harmony which reigned throughout every detail of its architecture. Though the farm itself was only on a lease, the house and the ground on which it stood was a freehold. Originally it had been a manor house, having come into the custody of the Flacks a couple of generations back, by means of a Miss Plowden, whose family had once been of gentle station. That, however, was long ago, and the last of the Plowdens had been only too glad to marry young James Flack, the thriving miller, who, having turned his attention to farming, had taken a lease of the land adjoining, which lease had not long since been renewed by his grandson. That their

house was at all exceptionally picturesque, or, indeed, exceptional in any way, was, however, an idea which had never entered into the heads of any of the Flack family. Mrs. Thomas Flack especially—who, as the eldest son's wife, had naturally a prospective interest in it—being never tired of dilating on its ugliness, clumsiness, and general disadvantages, and contrasting them with the comforts and elegancies of Bryonia Villa, the house she and her husband rented on another part of the same property. If it ever came into her hands, they would soon see, she said, what a change she would make in it—if, indeed, it would not be better to pull the whole crazy old thing to the ground at once. To Muriel, as she sat in her chaise waiting for the door to open, it seemed as if the very stones of the old house were offering up mute protests against the indignities it had sustained, and seemed only too likely

still to sustain at the hands of its unnatural owners.

At last, after a considerable delay, an unbarring of heavy iron bolts was heard, and a shock-headed maiden—old Jabez's grand-niece—opened the door, and informed her, with a grin of welcome which displayed all her gums, that her grandfather was still in the fields, but had left word that he would be back shortly. Muriel was not sorry to have a little time to herself to wander about the house, and re-acquaint herself with her old haunts before he returned. She was fond of every nook and corner of it, added to which there were certain private and particular associations connected with it of which no one knew anything but herself. Though she had never seen her mother there, this house stood more closely connected with her in her mind than any other spot on earth. There was a little miniature

which had been done of Mrs. Ellis a month or so before her first marriage—a worthless thing artistically, but not without a certain charm of truth and reality. This miniature represented a round-faced, serious-eyed young girl—too young apparently to dream of being anybody's wife—looking demurely out at the world through a framework of light brown hair falling in stiff curls against her brown, short-waisted frock. This portrait and the old rooms and passages were intimately connected together in Muriel's mind. She liked to picture her mother—that mother who seemed so much younger than she could ever somehow remember being herself—wandering about them, or peeping over the old wooden balcony, which ran round the top of the principal room—once the hall, now known to the dwellers of Boldre Farm as the front kitchen. In the days when the portrait was taken this hall must

have been a noisy spot, echoing to many voices, and reverberating to the tread of many feet; now it rarely echoed to any footsteps save those of old Mrs. Strong, Jabez's wife, who did the cooking, and looked after the calves and the poultry. Even the outdoor sounds, generally so predominant in a farmhouse, were not much heard here; for the walls were enormously thick, so thick that only an occasional bleating or lowing, or the muffled noise of winnowing and thrashing in the big barn seemed to succeed in penetrating. As Muriel stood leaning against one of the big black beams which ran from top to bottom of the house, the cawing of the rooks overhead and the rippling noise of a small stream dropping leisurely down into the mere were the only sounds that reached her ears.

Presently she heard her grandfather's voice, and ran downstairs to meet him.

He looked a good deal aged, she thought, in the eight months that had passed since they met. His hair had grown whiter, and his figure more bowed and bent. He declared, however, in answer to her inquiries, that he was well. He had been bad with the rheumatism off and on all summer. It was all the fault of Buckle and those other rascally men of his, who had let the drains get choked up, so that the fields were as wet as if they had been fished up out of the bottom of the mere. He had had a touch of liver complaint too—dyspepsia the doctors called it now—but that also was better. He was glad she had come all the same, he said, if it was only for the sake of annoying Mrs. Thomas. Mrs. Thomas had been there every day, and had wanted to leave one of those girls of hers—the youngest of 'em—with him, but he didn't choose to have her. Another—the one with pink eyes—was going to

marry a doctor—not the old man, but a new chap, that had lately come to the dispensary at D——. Mrs. Thomas was as cock-a-hoop about it as if 'twas a lord she'd got hold of. He had told her as much when she came to see him. Doctor, indeed, he had said, what was doctors he'd like to know? dratted fools most of 'em. If they'd only find out what ailed people's inside, i'stead of sticking of themselves up, and calling things by long names, maybe he'd think a bit more of 'em. They were to be married at Christmas, and he supposed they'd be wanting a present, and if they did, all they'd get from him would be a pestle and mortar—what else did a doctor want? Cock them up with their chiney and plate! And the old man chuckled grimly at his own jest.

To all this, Muriel listened, now and then putting in a word. The feud between her grandfather and his eldest son's family

was of far too old a standing to be mended now, so she simply left the matter alone. Then—after she had unpacked her luggage and distributed the various presents with which she had come armed—the two ate their supper together in the big half-lighted room, waited upon by Susan of the shockhead, and after that adjourned to a bench outside, where old John smoked a pipe, while Strong and Jabez and Susan ate their own supper within. This arrangement was supposed to be a sort of tribute to Muriel's gentility, one against which she had frequently protested—always, however, in vain. John Flack knew what was what, he said, and he wasn't going to have it go about the country that his granddaughter—a lord's sister, and a lady of rank as one might say herself—was set to eat her victuals with a lot of common farm-servants. If she came to stay with him things should be done right, or he'd know

the reason why. Indeed, it was as much as Muriel could do to hinder him from getting in silver forks and spoons, and hiring a waiter for the occasion of her stay!

They did not, however, sit late. Soon after nine o'clock the old man hobbled off to bed, his flickering candle gleaming on the black oaken step and bare unplastered walls. Muriel, too, went upstairs; not, however, to bed. She sat for a long time at the open window, leaning her arms upon the stone sill, and looking out at the mere, with its broad green setting, so flat and dull, yet with a charm for her which other and grander scenes might perhaps have missed. A little crescent moon was rising behind the trees, dropping tiny glints of light around it, some of which caught in the ripples of the stream, or fell with a broader but more feeble radiance over the mere. Mists, too, were rising in

all directions, stretching ghostly fingers here and there, now enclosing and now leaving bare the long rush-covered points of land. Above these, however, she could see away to where the flat horizon was broken by clumps of trees. That was the way to Chudleigh, she knew, where Halliday had been whirled away that afternoon. It was curious, she thought, coming across him again, just as she set foot in her grandfather's neighbourhood—inconvenient, too, if only that it brought the odd discrepancies in her own social lot so unnecessarily into relief. Those discrepancies had never hitherto given Muriel any particular uneasiness, indeed, had been rather a source on the whole of amusement to her than otherwise. Now, however, she could not help feeling that as regards Halliday, her position there was not without a certain awkwardness — the awkwardness which comes of any false or unnatural position.

That he personally would be affected one way or other by that position she did not, of course, suppose ; still there were others. There were those cousins of his—the young man with the red tie, his sister with the Cleopatra-like turn of the head—it would not be pleasant, she thought, meeting him in their company. True, there was a very simple remedy. She would have nothing to do but to keep out of his way, and refuse to see him should he take it into his head to call. Even in this, however, there was something not a little hurtful to her pride. Why should she be afraid or ashamed of meeting any one ? she asked herself angrily. Presently, her thoughts wandered away to their last meeting, and to that as yet unexplained glance which she had so unexpectedly intercepted. Muriel was not, as a rule, by any means given to interpreting stray glances into tributes to her own

charms, and certainly that Halliday, of all men upon earth, should fall a victim to those charms was about the last thing she would have expected. Nevertheless, there was something in that glance, and in the impression which it aroused, momentary as both were, that was not to be gainsaid. An intuitive (if ever that much abused word may safely be applied, this, probably, is a case in point), an intuitive conviction stronger than logic, told her that it did mean something, and that, moreover, there was one meaning, and one meaning only, which it could have had. Well, if so, it certainly was a reason the more for keeping out of his way. Nothing—apart even from her own wishes in the matter—could be more displeasing, more hurtful to her dignity, than that such a notion as this should get abroad in her present neighbourhood. If nothing else stood between them the odd inequality of their relative local

position was clearly, she told herself, impediment enough. It is true that this was only one, and, so to speak, an accidental side of her own social standing. There was another side to this—one where that inequality not only did not exist but might even be thought to incline the other way—but at present she was not disposed to dwell upon that side. Here, under her grandfather's roof, her wishes and instincts were all to range herself with what was his and what had been her mother's, rather than with her father's side of the house. All the ties of blood and early association linked her indeed with the former. What had these well-born Ellises ever done for her or hers? she asked herself. With the exception of Lady Rushton, not one of them had even so much as stretched out a hand of kindness in her direction; nay, that she and John had not actually died or gone to the workhouse in the days of their

poverty was no fault, certainly, of any of her father's family.

Leaning a little forward, Muriel let her eyes stray over the opposite walls of the house, grim and time-deepened even in the daylight, and now doubly dark and irresponsive, with its rows of small paned windows not one of which was illumined by even the faintest glow from within. Midway up the wall there was a small shield, or escutcheon, with the half effaced crest of the Plowdens, now, of course, wholly undecipherable. That, too, she thought, with suddenly awakened interest, stood or might be taken to stand as a symbol of gentle birth—one not in this instance associated either with the Ellises. She glanced back into the room, illuminated as it was by a single candle, at present flickering perilously near its socket. There was light enough, however, to see the big black rafters above ;

the brown, half-panelled walls, and scanty furniture; the bed, with its sloping top made to suit the exigencies of the ceiling; the queer old carved corner presses, which constituted the only preparation for the clothes of the inmate. These, too, were all Plowden properties, and had been left untouched since the house and room was occupied by them. Grimly uncomfortable undoubtedly it was, judged by any modern standard of comfort, yet for all that there was nothing sordid or common in its grimness. It was like some early German picture which Muriel had somewhere seen, she could not now remember where; one of those interiors which make you feel as if it and its inmates must surely still be somewhere in existence, so exact, so true to the very life in every *minutiae* of detail are they. With the thought of pictures and painters, her thoughts gradually drifted away again

from the Plowdens until they rested with Mr. Wygram, and for a full half-hour they dwelt amongst the incidents which had attended their last meeting—that meeting which had led to their final parting. Though she had refused so peremptorily to consider him as a lover, Muriel had a keen, almost a passionate desire to retain Mr. Wygram as a friend. Would he be her friend when he returned? she wondered; or was this just one of those things which no man, even the most generous, can ever frankly and fully forgive? Suddenly, with a quick tingling of the cheeks, she remembered how again and again he had dwelt upon that change which he had declared to have taken place in her, and to which he had ascribed his own failure to win her. It was not like Mr. Wygram to say that, she thought resentfully. It was not kind, and moreover, it was not true. She had not changed—not certainly as he meant

it—that she was certain she had not. As regards art, indeed, she was quite willing to admit that her own mental attitude was not what it had been. Art (with or without a big A) was still the foremost figure of her mental foreground, but it was not quite the universal touchstone, the one all-pervading sun and star and mental luminary that it had dawned before her younger and more enthusiastic eyes. She was a girl then, and she was a woman now ; and to her in her present way of thinking, art (especially where as in her case it had no claim after all to rank as more than an adornment) seemed a thing lying *within* the circle of a well-rounded life—enclosed in it as a bud is enclosed in its calyx—not a self-existent luminary to which life and everything else was to bow. So far then, she might and would plead guilty to the charge, but beyond that nothing, she declared to herself, could be more unjust ;

nay, more obviously and palpably untrue. Meantime, it was getting extremely late—too late to sit nursing her indignation any longer. The clock on Essant church tower had gone twelve some minutes ago, and her candle, now at the very last gasp, was emitting a succession of piteous flickers from the very bottom of its iron socket. The morning necessities, too, had to be thought of. Early hours were the rule at Boldre Farm, and if she meant to be down to breakfast with her grandfather at seven it was absolutely necessary to get to bed and to sleep now. Even while she was undressing and getting into bed, however, her mind dwelt with unappeased rancour upon that last, most unjustifiable, most unwarrantable assertion of Mr. Wygram's. It was not like him, she thought again. It was foolish, nay, contemptible; a proof, and to her mind a melancholy proof, of the amount of latent

vanity and folly lurking even in the very best and most rational of men, since he was so evidently unable to accept her own rejection of himself, without falling back upon such a silly, far-fetched, nay, such an obviously and clearly ridiculous hypothesis as that !

CHAPTER II.

THE BEACHAMPS OF CHUDLEIGH MANOR.

CHUDLEIGH manor-house was a fair-sized building of rather light-coloured, reddish sandstone, very carefully and elaborately ornamented with turrets and minarets and terra-cotta mouldings, stuck on wherever there was or was not the smallest architectural excuse. The greater part of the present house dated from only some forty years back, but there were a few yards of the original Queen Anne's house still standing, which shed a sort of early eighteenth century halo over the rest, giving an excuse to the Beachamp family for talking of their dear old house, and

their poor dear old house—one of which the present Lady Beachamp seemed anxious to avail herself largely. Inside the chief feature was a large hall, out of which every other room in the house opened, and which was itself approached from the outside by a short passage. This hall was not, however, by any means a Queen Anne's hall, neither was it Gothic, or Tudor, or Elizabethan, or of any known and recognized architecture, but a sort of mixture and medley of some half a dozen different styles, a kind of bastard Moorish chiefly, perhaps, predominating. Beyond this hall again there was a conservatory, or winter garden, which opened out on to the terraces, and which was a still more recent addition to the house; indeed, the difficulty of reconciling it with the remainder of the architecture had for a long time promised to prove insurmountable. At last, however, it had been ingeniously

overcome by the erection of a high wall or screen on either side, with arches rising one above the other, the whole surmounted by a magnificent array of chimney stacks, rich in moulding and interlaced lettering, but not at all required for the purpose of conveying smoke !

Apart from the rest of the house, and separated from it by the whole length of the three broad terraces, were the stables, which were in quite another manner again. They had been fitted up in a style of unusual magnificence by the late baronet—a noted patron of the turf, and a keeper himself of racehorses—tastes which his son, the present baronet, by no means shared. The greater part of the stalls, therefore, were now untenanted, or tenanted only in a manner which to the late owner would have seemed little, if anything, short of desecration.

Here, on the morning after his arrival

at Chudleigh, Halliday and his two cousins were assembled, all three booted and spurred for a ride. The two gentlemen, indeed, were already mounted and ready to set forth on their expedition; Miss Beachamp, however, still lingered, engrossed in consultation with a favourite functionary, a wizened-looking little old man, with the body of a child of ten, who having been head-jockey in the palmy days of the Chudleigh stables, and disabled in consequence of a fall, had been retained when the rest of the racing establishment was got rid of. At last, however, in response to repeated calls from her brother, she appeared, looking remarkably handsome in her high hat and well-fitting habit of dark brown cloth, and all three set off together along a sort of back way, leading past the home farm to the high road beyond.

It was frequently regretted by her

various friends that Lena Beachamp had so few "tastes." She neither played nor sang, nor even worked in crewels, nor embroidered slippers or smoking caps. One thing, however, it was admitted on all hands that she could do, and that was ride; indeed, of late years most of the arrangements in connection with the Chudleigh stable had fallen into her hands, Conroy Beachamp, like his father, having no sort of predilection in that direction. On the present occasion she was mounted upon a recent purchase, a handsome, nearly thorough-bred chestnut, whose unreasonable behaviour as it ambled to and fro the narrow road was a source of no small annoyance to the other and more peaceable members of the little cavalcade. At last her brother began to remonstrate.

"Really, Lena, if you can't keep that irascible beast of yours in order you had

better ride on by yourself," he said. "This is the third time poor Puck has been put out of his paces by you. And if there is a steady, well-behaved animal in the world it is Puck," he continued, patting the fat sides of that injured animal.

Miss Beachamp smiled disdainfully. "I would as soon ride a cow as Puck," she said.

"And I would as soon ride a hippogriff or a flying dragon as that ill-conditioned brute of yours."

"Zuleika is not ill-conditioned ; she is only fresh. If she had a gallop she would be all right."

"Then in Heaven's name, take her for her gallop, and let us have a little peace. Only don't ask Puck and me to accompany you. We neither of us see the smallest entertainment in tearing madly across country—particularly in the month of August."

"You'll come with me, won't you, Steeny?" she said, turning to her cousin.

"No, no, leave his reverence alone," said her brother. "We'll go on and wait at the cross roads. That will make a splendid gallery for you as you come careering down those big pastures."

"As if I cared for a gallery!" Miss Beachamp said disdainfully.

"Don't you? Then you're the only woman in the world that doesn't. Come along, Steeny."

"No, I shall go with Lena," he answered.

"You don't know what you're going in for, then. She'll take you over the worst places in the country, and then leave you stranded on the top of some mudbank."

"I must take my chance, then," Halliday replied laughing, turning aside as he spoke to open a gate for his cousin, while Conroy, with a shrug of the shoulders, rode leisurely off down the road.

The other two passed through the gate, and into the field beyond. It was a large field, and the one beyond was larger still, so that they were able to put their horses into a canter at once. The morning was deliciously bright, with a soft wind which ruffled the horses' manes, and set all the little tufts of grass a-swaying. To the left a line of carts was carrying in the last half-dozen loads of corn to the haggard. They could see the big stacks rising in the distance, the corn gleaming yellow for a minute as it flew up from the carts, and was caught on the forks of the men above. After crossing the fields they skirted along the edge of a small wood, through a green billowy sweep of bracken, with just enough brown fronds to intensify the fact that it was summer still and not autumn, and then out into another long succession of pastures lying beyond. Both were now

roused with their gallop. Lena's dark eyes were glancing merrily under her hat ; Halliday, too, was feeling as if the last fumes of Whitechapel were now at length getting dislodged from his brain. Below them presently appeared a ditch topped with a stiff, quickset hedge, and not a symptom of a gap from end to end. At this Lena set her horse. The fence was a big one naturally, but the chestnut, already excited with its gallop, made a good deal more of it than was necessary, landing on the further brink in a fashion which would have unseated many a practised horseman ; not so, however, its rider, whose well-adjusted skirts hardly seemed to flutter as she settled down into her canter on the further side.

"You ride like a centaur, Lena," her cousin said admiringly, as he joined her in the field beyond.

Miss Beachamp smiled slightly, but

otherwise took no heed of the compliment. "You don't go badly for a parson, Steeny, either," she said indifferently. "See, there is Conroy. Keep to the left, or we shall come upon a canal, which will be more than even Zuleika can manage."

"Well, you two irrationals, I hope you're satisfied now," that gentleman said as they came up. "Having made yourselves extremely hot, and ridden your horses nearly to a standstill, perhaps you'll be content to proceed along the road like Christians for the future."

In effect, after this they rode quietly along under the double shade of a line of branching poplars which stretched across this part of the country for miles, Zuleika justifying her mistress's prediction by henceforth comporting herself with the utmost decorum, despite the evident provocation she received from the detested Puck's vicinity.

"Do you know where you are bound for?" Conroy presently said to Halliday.

"Somewhere to fish, I believe," he answered.

"Yes; in a place called Boldre Mere."

Halliday half drew his rein. "Look here, Conroy, I am not going to that farmhouse," he said decidedly.

"'Nobody asked you, sir, she said!' Who ever mentioned farmhouses? I suppose there's nothing to forbid our eating our luncheon near a lake, or even in trying to catch pike in it—is there?"

"We often go there in the summer time really, Steeny," Lena Beachamp said reassuringly.

Halliday said no more, but he kept his suspicion. He also kept a watchful eye upon Mr. Conroy's proceedings, shrewdly suspecting him of an intention of bringing them unexpectedly round to the vicinity of the farm.

Once within sight of the mere they turned off the road again, and trotted along its edge until they reached the further end, where, as Halliday expected, they were not long in coming within sight of the dark red chimney-stacks and picturesque weather-mottled walls which owned old John Flack as their master. Here, therefore, he began again to remonstrate.

"Mind, Conroy, I tell you I'm not going there," he said, pointing in their direction.

"Very well then, don't by all means, if you prefer not," his cousin replied nonchalantly. "Unless you're prepared to cut your friend of yesterday altogether, though; you'd better not look to the right, for there she is within a dozen yards of you," he added, a minute or two later, in the same tone.

It was quite true. Whether Conroy's sharp eyes had detected her afar off, or whether chance had simply befriended

him, certain it was that Miss Ellis herself was sitting there, with an easel before her and a sheaf of brushes in her hand; so near, too, that it was simply impossible for Halliday to avoid noticing her, the more so as she had already lifted her head, and was looking steadily in their direction.

“Now for it. Spring from your charger—never mind what becomes of it. Throw yourself on the ground at her feet, and crave permission to kiss the hem of her garment!” Conroy whispered jocosely.

Halliday repaid this advice with a glance of anything but amiable meaning in his facetious relative’s direction. So far, however, he obeyed the direction as to get down, give his horse to a servant, who had just driven up with the fishing-rods and luncheon baskets, and walk over to where Muriel and her easel were encamped.

She had laid down her brush on seeing

him, and now rose up from her camp-stool, blushing slightly, but not certainly looking by any means particularly overjoyed at the encounter.

“ I assure you I hadn’t the least intention of invading you like this, Miss Ellis,” Halliday began hurriedly. “ It was my cousin’s doing. He insisted upon bringing us round this way.”

Muriel smiled a little disdainfully.

“ The field is not mine, Mr. Halliday,” she said. “ And if it were even, I hope I should not be so churlish as to wish to prevent you and your friends from riding in it,” she added.

By this time the other two had also dismounted, and now approached so nearly that it became impossible to avoid going through the ceremony of introduction. This Halliday performed with the least amiable grace in the world. Muriel’s bow, too, was anything but encouraging, but

Conroy Beachamp had never yet been daunted by any woman's manner, and now proceeded to plunge into conversation with all the ease of conscious fascination. Her sketch, he assured her, was perfection—what a very delightful talent it was, to be sure! Nothing in the world was so enviable as a power of painting. He himself would give his eyes to do it, but unfortunately it was impossible. In fact, it was a most extraordinary thing, he said, but there never yet had been a Beachamp who could draw a line. That is, he added, unless it might be his sister; she drew a little, he believed, though he couldn't say he had ever seen any of her performances.

"I draw abominably," Miss Beachamp put in herself, in her full contralto tones.

Muriel turned rather markedly to the sister, and away from the brother. "You don't care for it, perhaps?" she said inquiringly.

"Yes, I do ; I should like to be able to paint some things—my own horses, for instance. But I can't. The more I try the worse they get."

"Horses are difficult," Muriel said consolingly. "That seemed a beautiful one you were riding," she continued. "May I go and look at it a little nearer?"

Miss Beachamp acceded willingly, and they walked on together to where the horses had been left. The two young men waited, expecting them to return, but, after paying their respects to Zuleika, they strolled on to the top of the field, which was there crossed by a road, and from which a small path bordered with willows led direct to the farmhouse. Here, therefore, Muriel paused.

"I am afraid I must go back now," she said ; "my grandfather will be returning shortly, and will be expecting me for dinner."

"But your drawing things—you have left them behind you?" her companion said inquiringly.

"I know; but they will be quite safe. I will send a messenger for them from the farm."

"I am sorry you have to go," Lena Beachamp said abruptly.

"So am I; it is much pleasanter out here. Still I think I ought not to delay any longer."

"Perhaps we may meet again, then."

"Thank you, yes, I hope we may," Muriel replied politely, secretly, however, not a little surprised at this somewhat unexpected cordiality.

She was setting off down the path when she was interrupted by the sound of wheels, and over the soft sandy road a small open carriage came bowling along. In it sat a single occupant, a lady, young and plump and pretty, with an

expression of conscious elegance certainly justified by her dress, which seemed a sort of quintessence of the prevailing modes. A pale blue, diaphanous-looking material enveloped the greater part of her person, not, however, to the concealment of a pair of remarkably pretty feet, encased in a pair of equally pretty shoes, which lay in state upon the opposite cushion, and upon which their owner's eyes were riveted with an expression which lent an air of intense, almost rapturous, satisfaction to her little, round, somewhat vacuous face.

Muriel glanced at her companion. "That young lady's shoes seem to be a great comfort to her," she said, smiling, as the carriage passed on.

"They are. All her clothes are. She thinks of nothing else. She is my step-mother," Miss Beachamp replied, bringing out these items of information with a sort

of jerk, and a frown which made her black eyebrows look like one.

Muriel experienced the shock we all feel when—dreaming of nothing of the kind—we find that we have inadvertently stumbled upon something very like a rudeness. “I beg your pardon,” she said quickly, and then stopped, not exactly knowing what to say next.

“There is nothing to beg my pardon about. You only said that her shoes seemed a great comfort to her, and so I’m sure they are. She has three dozen pairs, and not a single strong one amongst them all.”

“I mean that I suppose I ought to have guessed who she was,” Muriel said penitently. “I can’t think why I didn’t. Perhaps it was because she looked so very—so very young.”

“Yes, she is young—young, at least, to be married to my father. She is

twenty-four. A year younger than I am."

"Oh."

After this there seemed to be really nothing further to say; so, with another vague expression of regret upon her part, and another friendly hope of meeting again from her companion, Muriel set off down the path leading to the farmhouse.

She had hardly done so before the two young men came up.

"Has she gone?" Conroy inquired eagerly.

"Miss Ellis? Yes; she had to go back to dinner. Her grandfather expected her, she said."

Halliday made a movement as if he would have followed, but, if so, he changed his mind, and suddenly strolled away in the opposite direction.

"Well, I call that a regular snare!" Conroy exclaimed, throwing himself petulantly

upon the bank. "After all my scheming, too!—getting rid of her ladyship so beautifully, and coming off here by ourselves, now to be cheated like that. By the way," he added suddenly, "wasn't that her ladyship I saw passing just now? Surely that cerulean vision could have been no one else?"

His sister nodded.

"Did you speak to her?"

"No."

"Did she see you? I mean did she see Miss Ellis?"

"No, I think not; I think she saw nothing but her own shoes," Miss Beachamp replied disdainfully, as she gathered up her skirts, and moved away to where the luncheon had meantime been set out under the shade of a couple of wide spreading oaks.

In this, however, she was mistaken, and young Lady Beachamp maligned, as she

found upon her return home. Dismounting as usual in the stable, she was proceeding up the steps of the terrace on her way to the house, when she heard her name called, and turning saw the youthful mistress of Chudleigh extended on a sort of *chaise longue* which formed part of the summer furniture of the terrace. Lady Beachamp had changed her dress since her return from driving, and was now attired in a trailing cream-coloured peignoir, adorned with lace; a white lace scarf being also wound around her head.

"Only conceive, my dear Lena, my despair!" she exclaimed, as her stately stepdaughter drew near with reluctant steps. "Conceive, two more refusals this afternoon! Those Mowbray girls can't come because of that little brother of theirs having returned home from school with the measles, and now I've just heard from Lady Hunt to say that she and her

daughter are engaged to go to their cousin's in Cornwall, so that we shall literally have nothing next week but a houseful of men !”

“I shouldn't have thought you would have minded that,” Miss Beachamp observed grimly.

“Minded, Lena ? I'm not so selfish as to think only of myself. I'm thinking of *them*, poor creatures. Conceive, nine of them ! including that cousin of yours, who of course doesn't even shoot, so we shall have him on our hands all day long, and not a soul to help us except this dreadful Lady McClusky, who I'm sure is quite a sufficient handful of herself. Whatever are we to do ?”

“You needn't trouble yourself much about Stephen. I don't think he will expect any particular entertaining,” Miss Beachamp said drily.

“Oh, that's all very well, Lena, but *all*

young men require entertaining," her step-mother replied authoritatively. "You may take my word for it they do, and in these matters I really have a great deal more experience than you—though I am a year younger," she added parenthetically. "But the thing is to know what to do now. It's too late to write and ask any fresh people; besides, every one's plans are made up at this time of the year. I'm sure it is enough to turn one's hair grey, the trouble one has in getting these parties together. It is such an extraordinary thing, too, that there are no young ladies in this neighbourhood whom one could ask at a minute's notice. Generally there are a great many too many. I know at home there were dozens upon dozens and the only difficulty was to know how to ask some without offending all the rest; but here they seem to have all either married, or died, or gone into hospitals or sister-

hoods. Now do, dear Lena, exert yourself for once, and see if you can't think of some one we could get. Even one would be such a help."

Her stepdaughter shook her head. "I know no young ladies," she said decisively.

"Oh yes, you do, Lena, and now I remember what I was going to ask you, only those refusals put everything else out of my head. I wanted you to tell me who that nice distinguished looking girl was I saw you walking with this morning? I was so struck with her cloak. Did you notice it had all those little puckers down the back which are just beginning to come in? I was very near making Parkins stop the carriage and asking you to introduce me on the spot, on purpose that I might find out where she got it. Who is she, do tell me?"

"She is a Miss Ellis," Lena Beachamp answered. "She is staying with her

grandfather, Mr. Flack, the farmer, one of my father's tenants," she continued maliciously, watching her stepmother's face to observe the effect of this last announcement.

That effect was quite as marked as could have been desired. Lady Beachamp sat bolt upright, letting both her satin-shod feet come into contact with the gravel, as she sat staring at her stepdaughter in open-eyed dismay.

"Flacks! One of the tenants!" she repeated. "Good gracious, Lena, I didn't know you were in the habit of associating with those sort of people. Does your father know of this?"

Lena's lip curled disdainfully. "I don't know whether he does or doesn't," she said.

"Oh, but you shouldn't do it—indeed, indeed you shouldn't, Lena. I know my mother never would have allowed us to

get acquainted with any one of that kind even if we had wished it, which, of course, we didn't. Those sort of people are so presuming, too. You'll have her coming up here at all hours of the day. There'll never be an end of it. You just see if there will."

"I don't think there's the least likelihood of anything of that sort," Miss Beachamp said decidedly.

"How can you tell, my dear Lena? It's extremely imprudent; I assure you it is—and with your brother and all those other young men, too—you don't know *what* mightn't happen."

"What has Lena been doing imprudent now?" inquired her father, who had just come on to the terrace with a newspaper in his hand. He was a slight, fair man, not at all like either of his children, with a small neatly-pointed beard, and a small half-suppressed smile which from time to

time lent a somewhat ironical air to his face. He was smiling now as he addressed his wife.

"Upon what subject are you favouring Lena with your maternal advice, my love?" he inquired blandly. "Has she been jumping any more five-barred gates, or going out in the sun without a veil?"

"Oh no, nothing of that sort, Sir Anthony. It's about some people she has been meeting—Flacks, or some such horrid name—farming people. I tell Lena it's very dangerous encouraging those sort of people; particularly nowadays, when there are all those dreadful notions of equality and universal suffrage, and I don't know what all about; you never know what it may lead to."

"Farmer Flack is a widower, too, I believe," Sir Anthony said meditatively.

"Oh, I don't mean dangerous in that way, of course," replied his wife. "I don't

think there's the least fear of Lena wanting to marry him. He is a great deal too old for that."

"Yet young ladies do sometimes marry men who are a good deal older than themselves," her husband replied, as he drew a garden chair towards him, and spread his newspaper leisurely out upon his knee.

"Oh, you mean me, I suppose. But that's a very different sort of thing. You are not a great fat greasy farmer, smelling of beer and bacon. You look, as every one says, ever so much younger than you really are—besides, you are a gentleman."

Sir Anthony bowed gravely.

"And this Miss Ellis is quite a lady," Lena said positively. "I never met her before to-day, and I don't generally take to girls, but I liked what I saw of her very much, and I should like to ask her to come

here some day, if you don't mind," she continued, addressing herself pointedly to her father.

Lady Beachamp got up, letting her voluminous draperies trail around her over the gravel.

"Of course, Lena, if your *father* chooses to allow you to ask such people to the house I can't prevent it," she said loftily. "It would be quite ridiculous of me to attempt to assume any authority over you when you're so much older than I am. All I say is *I* won't receive her. So just please to give me notice when she is coming, that I may make my arrangement accordingly." And so saying her ladyship rustled off to prepare for dinner, leaving her husband smiling, and her step-daughter frowning ferociously.

Next morning's post, however, brought about a wonderful change. Lady Beachamp entered the dining-room with an open

letter in her hand, and a countenance expressive of the most universal sweetness and benevolence.

“Do tell me again the name of that young lady I saw you speaking to yesterday?” she inquired upon her entrance.

The question, of course, was addressed to Lena, but as she did not seem disposed to reply to it, the information was, after some little delay, supplied by Conroy.

“Ellis? Yes, I knew it was the same. Now how could you, my dear Lena, tell me those dreadful things about her?”

“I told you no dreadful things about her,” Lena said angrily.

“Yes, you did; you told me she was a farmer’s daughter.”

“I told you she was a farmer’s granddaughter, and so she is.”

“Oh well, my dear Lena, so she may be. Everybody, I suppose, has *some* vulgar relatives. I know my mother used to tell

me about some dreadful people—Slaughters, or some such shocking name—one of whom married an aunt of hers. But she is much more than that—Miss Ellis, I mean. Here's a letter I've just had from Lady Rushton, all full of her. She seems to consider it quite an event in the neighbourhood that she should have come to it. Do just listen to what she says. 'So I hear my charming cousin, Muriel Ellis, is staying in your part of the world, I believe with some of her mother's people. If you can only induce her to come out of her shell you will indeed be in luck. Her brother, you may remember, was that poor young Lord Dumbelton, who died so sadly just after he had succeeded to his immense property. Unfortunately, the title has gone to the younger branch—dreadful people, Plymouth brethren, or something of that sort, who never see a soul—but a good deal of the property was, happily,

settled upon Muriel, who has a charming little house in Chelsea, and is altogether one of the most delightful and accomplished people of my acquaintance.'— There, Lena, now why couldn't you have told me all that yesterday, when we were talking about her?"

"But I never heard a word about it before," her stepdaughter replied indignantly.

"Nor I either," said her brother. "On the contrary, Steeny stood me out only yesterday that she earned her bread as a struggling artist!"

"Evidently, Stephen is the culprit," Sir Anthony said, looking round with an air of 'amusement at his nephew. "You'll have to clear yourself, Steeny, or remain for ever under the imputation of hiding, not your own but somebody else's light under a bushel."

"But I knew nothing of it either, sir," Halliday answered eagerly.

"Indeed? And how long, may I inquire, have you known her?"

"Since the spring. I met her a good many times in the New Forest; she was staying there with a friend," the young man answered, the colour mounting involuntarily to his face at the question.

"And during those various interviews she never mentioned to you that the late Lord Dumbelton was her brother?"

"No, sir."

"Or that she had any other relations besides these Flacks?"

"No, sir."

"Or that she had a fortune of her own?"

"No, sir."

"Then all I can say is, she must be a very peculiar young woman, and I should be rather curious to make her acquaintance," Sir Anthony remarked, as he turned away from the table and took up his morning's newspaper.

"That's just what I am saying, my dear," exclaimed his wife; "or, rather, what I was coming to. We must ask her here at once—for next week, you know. It will be the very thing. I will go and write a note, and Conroy shall ride over this afternoon and bring me back the answer. Won't you, Conroy?"

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure, ma'am, but, unfortunately, my day is inexorably consecrated to the rabbits," replied her stepson.

"Oh well, it doesn't matter. One of the servants can go, then."

"I will take it, Lady Beachamp, if you will give it to me," Halliday said.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Halliday. That will be very kind. You are sure it won't inconvenience you?"

"Not in the least."

So accordingly, it was settled, and so in defiance of sundry excellent resolutions

to the contrary, Halliday was once more seen wending his way to the shores of Boldre Mere, this time charged with a small, delicately perfumed note, conveying Lady Beachamp's compliments and entreaties that Miss Ellis would kindly excuse the shortness of the notice, and consent to make one of the party which were expected to assemble at Chudleigh Manor upon the following Tuesday.

CHAPTER III.

THE FLACKS OF BRYONIA VILLA.

HE did not, however, find her there, as she had walked off about an hour before to call upon the Thomas Flacks. Old John had been strongly opposed to the notion of this expedition. What did she want with running after them? he had asked. She'd see plenty of them, he'd take his oath, before she'd done. Besides, if there was to be any calling at all, it was their business to call on her, not her on them—what sense was there in going cheapening herself like that? Muriel, however, stuck to her point. There would be quite enough offence taken, she

knew, whatever she might say or do, so that it was just as well to avoid giving it wherever it was possible.

The Thomas Flacks' house was about a mile from Boldre Mere, on another part, as has been said, of the Chudleigh property. Originally it had been known as Bryant's Farm, but the present occupants had thrown out a couple of bow windows, tacked on a greenhouse, raised the roof, stuccoed the front, and improved the name into Bryonia Villa. The school of farming to which Mr. Thomas Flack belonged was a very advanced one, and he was a very advanced exponent of that school. His "roots" and "samples" took all the prizes, and his fat cows and sheep were the joy and pride, of every agricultural show for thirty miles around. So widely, indeed, had his fame been noised abroad, that pupils came to him—young men who desired, or were desired by

their families—to sit at his feet and draw inspiration from his lips. He also held one or two agencies in the immediate neighbourhood, and was altogether not only independent of his father, but a very much richer man than him—a circumstance which by no means added to old John's satisfaction with things in general. Mrs. Thomas Flack had been the daughter of a well-to-do maltster in the neighbouring county town, and was a very important personage, too, in her own circle. What with her own and her husband's money, and with the acknowledged gentility of the Barbers—she herself had been a Miss Barber—she had always been able to dominate the other Flacks from a pedestal of acknowledged superiority. Of late, however, these glories had been somewhat dimmed by the yet more commanding lustre encircling Muriel, whose dignities indeed were naturally of a

nature not a little to impress, and even overawe the various members of her mother's family. When the latter first went to live at Chelsea, and before Mrs. Skynner's appearance on the scene, old John had once been to spend a week with his granddaughter, and on his return his whole talk had been of Muriel—her house, and dress, and fashion, and accomplishments, her carriages and horses, her maidservants and manservants, all in turns had been dilated on, and never so loudly, or with so much gusto, as in his daughter-in-law's hearing. All this would have tried the equanimity of even the meekest of women, and Mrs. Thomas Flack was far from being a meek woman. The consequence was, she nourished a considerable grudge against Muriel, seldom missing an opportunity, private or public, of wreaking it. One circumstance, however, kept her to some degree in awe, and

that was not her money, nor yet her talents—which latter, indeed, she entirely declined to believe in—but simply the fact that her brother had been a lord. There were not many lords in Mrs. Flack's neighbourhood, or if there were, she personally had never come in contact with them, so that the idea had never become cheapened by familiarity, but retained all that freshness and almost mystical gloss against which democracy—in England, at all events—has hitherto striven in vain. It followed, therefore, that her dislike to Muriel by no means included any desire that the latter should abstain from coming to Bryonia Villa; on the contrary, she would have liked to summon the neighbourhood—if necessary, by the sound of drum and trumpet—in order that it might be known as widely as possible that *her* niece—the one whose brother had been a lord—was at present to be seen visibly present under its roof.

Unfortunately on this occasion there was no time for anything of the sort, as Muriel had simply walked over after dinner without giving any warning of her intention to do so. Upon being shown into the drawing-room it was found to be tenanted only by two people, a young lady and gentleman, both of whom started up in some dismay upon her entrance. The young lady was Miss Anna-Maria Flack, the eldest daughter of the house, good-looking (as, to do them justice, all the Flacks were), with round pink cheeks, a wide mouth, and a quantity of tawny hair, dragged down nearly to the bridge of her nose. The young man was a smart, smiling individual, with a small tuft on his chin, and a large pin in his necktie, whom Muriel at once perceived to be that young dispensary doctor of whom her grandfather had spoken. Both young people seemed so extremely embarrassed,

not to say disconcerted, by her unexpected appearance, that she compassionately proposed to go out into the garden, and look for the rest of the family, suggesting that her cousin might follow as soon as she had had time to get her hat.

The garden, or "grounds," as the Flacks preferred the vicinity of their mansion being called, consisted of a spruce little lawn surrounded on two sides by a laurel hedge and decorated with a line of pert-looking little juniper bushes. Beyond this was a fountain, not at present containing any water, where a plaster damsel with one fore-finger laid coquettishly to her lips, and her feet crossed one above the other in an impossible attitude, was keeping guard over some cobwebs. Beyond this again were sundry beds of flowers, chiefly calceolarias, set in a pattern of variegated gravel, and guarded by a *chevaux de frise* of small tin spikes. Look-

ing around her rather disconsolately, Muriel suddenly remembered a certain double hedge of beech, planted by some earlier proprietor, which had given her a good deal of satisfaction on her last visit. Hastening to the spot, she found, rather to her surprise, that it had not been improved away, though a good many ragged holes had been worn in its sides by the gardener, hurrying to and fro with his wheelbarrow to the other and more ornamental portions of the grounds. She had just entered one end of the green funnel, and was luxuriating in the colour of the sunlight as seen through the leaves, when her ears were saluted with a succession of shrill shrieks, accompanied by the deeper, but hardly more harmonious tones of a man's voice. A minute after a young lady came bouncing through one of the openings of the hedge, and nearly fell into her arms.

Muriel gave a slight gasp—not entirely

from alarm. This was her youngest cousin, Miss Letty, or Letitia Flack, who, a year before, had been a round-eyed, honest-faced schoolgirl, with a rumpled holland pinafore, and a marked partiality for jam and toffy. Now her hair was crimped and tortured over her nose like her sister's ; a hat stuck full of feathers and artificial flowers was set at the very back of her head ; her skirts were so tight, and her heels so high, that it was perfectly marvellous how she walked at all ; while her face had acquired an amount of self-possession, or to speak less euphemistically, pertness, which, as the result of a single year's experience, really spoke extremely well for the adaptability of the human countenance.

Lifting her head from this somewhat rueful transformation, Muriel beheld a young man standing in the green-margined opening ; a hot, bucolic-looking young

man, with broad red cheeks, and the slow bovine gaze of some ruminating animal. Probably the glance which met his was not exactly encouraging, for he turned and beat a hasty retreat, his step sounding ponderously over the gravel.

"La he's gone, I'm so glad!" Miss Letty exclaimed breathlessly. "How you did frighten me though, Muriel, to be sure! Who ever would have thought of you being there? I was running to get away from that tiresome Mr. Sweetman. He is such a horrid tease."

"Who is he?" Muriel inquired.

"Mr. Sweetman? Oh, he's one of father's young men—that come here to learn farming, you know. Not that I believe he ever does learn any, for he is always running after me and wanting to make love; but I tell him he's a deal too ugly for that; now, ain't he?"

"I don't know; I should say that you

were rather young," Muriel replied, in what she herself felt to be a decidedly unsympathetic and elder-cousinly tone of voice.

Miss Letitia tossed her head.

"Oh, come, I don't see *that*, Muriel. Anyhow, I don't care about it—not a scrap; I hear a deal too much of it, that's the truth. What with Anna-Maria and Mr. Condry, and now with Gus and Miss Fisher, I declare I'm sick to death of the whole subject!"

"Is Augustus—is your brother engaged to be married too?" Muriel inquired with some surprise.

"Well, not to say exactly engaged, but it's all one and the same thing. She's terribly ugly, poor girl—Miss Fisher, I mean—the ugliest girl ever you saw in your life, and I don't believe Gus cares two straws about her; but she's awfully in love with him, quite too awfully. I wonder

myself how she can be," Miss Letitia continued with sisterly impartiality, "but she is. It was somewhere where she was at school she saw [him first, and she fell in love with him straight off—I suppose on account of his looks. Anyhow she says she'll never marry anybody else, and as she's an orphan," with ever so much money, of course it's a great thing for Gus. The only bother is, that she's got a guardian, or some one of that kind, who vows she shan't marry or even be engaged till she's twenty-one, which won't be for another year. However, she's here a great deal. Indeed, you'll see her to-day, for she's stopping with us now."

"Poor girl!" Muriel said involuntarily.

"Poor? Well, now, I don't see how you make out that, Muriel. To think of a girl of that age with all that money! Of course *you* mayn't think much of it, because you've got as much and more yourself, I

suppose ; but if it was me I'd be dancing all day with joy at the very idea. Only I wouldn't go and give it to a man like Gus. Catch me ! I'd keep it, and amuse myself. Laws ! what times I'd have ! Let me see ; first I'd get a heap of clothes, and then I'd go to—— ”

The further elucidation of Miss Letitia's views of enjoyment were here interrupted by the advance of a group from the house ; a group consisting of Mrs. Flack and her eldest son, Miss Anna-Maria Flack and her attendant Condry, and a young lady in mourning, whom Muriel at once concluded to be the Miss Fisher in question. The poor girl certainly was extremely, almost painfully plain, her pale face and black clothes giving her in her present company something the air of a small daw amongst a group of loud and gorgeous cockatoos ; in spite, however, of this plainness, there was something

gentle and appealing in her expression which won Muriel's heart, and made her pity her all the more for having set her affections upon such a being as Gus Flack, whose Adonis graces and airs of provincial fashion struck her as even more pronounced and less attractive than when she last remembered them.

After the first greeting, Mrs. Flack proposed an adjournment to the house, and a few minutes after Muriel found herself seated in state in the drawing-room, the centre of a circle of ladies, the men of the party having more judiciously elected to remain outside. Nobody seemed to have anything in particular to say, and nothing at all to do except to sit and stare at her with all their eyes. It was rather trying, the more so as she really did honestly wish to be all that was friendly and cousinly, yet could not for the life of her forbear wondering whether any one in

this establishment ever read or worked, or did anything at all with their hands; or why, when the garden boasted flowers, and every hedge and ditch was full of ferns and leaves, not one even should be brought in to ornament the house?

Mrs. Flack, who seemed oppressed with the heat, had flung herself into a big velvet armchair, and was fanning herself vigorously with a sheet of the *Farmer's Gazette*.

"I declare coming back over that common was like walking through an oven," she exclaimed pantingly. "I never knew it as hot as it is this year. I suppose you came in your carriage, Muriel," she added turning to her niece with a mixture of deference and displeasure, "so it's easy for you to look as cool as you do."

"My carriage? I have no carriage," the latter replied.

"Haven't you? Why, your grandfather said he believed you were going to

bring it down with you this year from London."

"But I have no carriage even in London now," Muriel said rather eagerly; "and if I had I certainly shouldn't bring it here. I like walking much better than driving."

"Do you, now? Well, how extraordinary!"

After this there was another pause which this time was broken by Miss Fisher, who ventured upon a question in a very small and unassuming little voice. "Were you at the Queen's drawing-room this year, Miss Ellis?" she inquired, her pale face flushing at her own audacity.

"No, I was not. In fact, I have only been once in my life, when a cousin of mine was kind enough to take me," Muriel answered, a thought of the ladies of Cranford crossing her mind as she spoke.

"A cousin of yours? That will be one of your father's fine relations, I'll be

bound ? ” Mrs. Flack exclaimed aggressively. “ Who is she now, Muriel, tell us ? Is she a duchess or a countess ? ”

“ Her name is Lady Rushton, and she is neither a duchess nor a countess,” Muriel answered quietly.

“ Does she give big parties ? does she give balls ? and do the princes and princesses go to them ? ” Miss Letitia inquired eagerly. “ I should dearly love to see them, that I will admit,” she continued pensively.

“ No, I don’t think she gives any balls, and certainly I never met any princes or princesses there,” Muriel said, glad of an excuse for smiling honestly. “ She has a good many clever people at her house, though—authors and artists, and so forth.”

“ Authors and artists ? Oh, pooh ! I wouldn’t give a pin for any of them ! ” Miss Letty exclaimed in a tone of disgust.

“ That’s because you ain’t as learned

and clever as your cousin, miss," her mother replied tartly. "If you were you'd be as fond of your books and things as she is."

Happily before Muriel could be expected to respond to this, a diversion was effected by the entrance of her uncle, whom she sprang up to greet with no small alacrity. Mr. Thomas Flack was much less distinctively and obtrusively vulgar than either his wife or his children. He was a tall, strongly-built man, with the good looks all the family—excepting, indeed, poor Hal—shared to such an unusual degree. His habit, too, of mingling with all classes made him to some extent at home with all, so that Muriel felt very much more at her ease in his company than in that of any of the other members of her mother's family. He now proposed that she should accompany him for a walk round the farm, a proposal received with

cries of derision by the other ladies, but to which she readily assented, and they set off together down a long muddy lane leading from the more ornamental portion of the grounds to those others, less presentable to the outer world, but very much nearer and dearer to their owner's heart.

As long as they were here and alone Muriel was perfectly content. Her uncle took her to see his new machines, and through all his various pens of sheep, where she won golden opinions from him and from the herd, by hitting upon the best amongst a group of ewes which were to be despatched next day to a distant show. He was going in more for sheep than ever he told her confidentially. People talked of farming not paying, but it only meant they were fools, and didn't know what to take to. If people would go sticking to their old ways, and breeding

from their old stock, why of course they must expect to fail. He hadn't failed, and didn't mean to neither, but then he knew what he was about. He bought only the best stock, and gave the best price for it, and only bred from the best stock, etc., etc.

All this, if rather more technical perhaps than she quite appreciated, was at all events highly improving, and Muriel would have been perfectly content to remain there during the whole of the rest of her visit. Unfortunately this was not to be. Turning the corner of the lane on their way back from a visit of inspection to some distant pastures, they came upon the entire party, not indeed including Mrs. Flack, but including the rubicund Mr. Sweetman, who grew ruddier still as he caught her eye. Muriel tried to cling to her uncle, but he basely deserted her, escaping himself through a gap, and leaving her to battle single-handed

with the host. There was no help for it, and the only thing left was to put as good a face upon the matter as possible. One thing, however, she did resolve, and that was that nothing should induce her to pair off with her cousin Augustus, of whose complimentary and truly appalling style of conversation she retained only too vivid a recollection. To this end she attached herself first to her cousin Anna-Maria, and then, when Mr. Gus had successfully edged himself in between them, to Miss Letty and the devoted Sweetman, rather to the curtailment of that subdued fire of witticisms which was passing between the pair. Here again, however, Gus pursued her, and as they had now reached a part of the lane where only two could walk abreast, she was obliged for a while to put up with his company and attentions, neither of which were rendered at all more tolerable by the piteous glances cast in

their direction by the poor little *fiancée*, who evidently suspected her of a design to draw her handsome but faithless bumpkin from his allegiance. Muriel was seriously contemplating a sudden dash over the nearest ditch by way of escape from her present predicament, when, to her intense relief, a tall figure was seen approaching up the lane, which it did not require a second glance to identify as that of Stephen Halliday.

At his approach the whole party came to a dead stop. It was a sufficiently formidable assemblage to face, but Halliday was not easily daunted where only ordinary fellow-mortals were concerned, and he advanced directly to Muriel.

"I am the bearer of a note from Lady Beachamp, Miss Ellis," he said, loud enough to be heard by the whole party. "She hopes to persuade you to come to Chudleigh upon Tuesday."

“To Chudleigh! she’s asked to Chudleigh! Oh, Lord, how lovely!” Miss Letty exclaimed in a perfectly audible aside.

“There’s to be a shooting party, Mr. Huskinson told me so. It’s very odd, I’m sure, that they never think of asking us,” the other sister said grudgingly.

To this tide of mingled regrets and envy Muriel hastened, however, to put a stop.

“Thank you, Mr. Halliday, but will you kindly say that I could not possibly go,” she said hastily. “I should not like to leave my grandfather. Will you tell Lady Beachamp so, and also that I will write a note myself this evening to thank her.”

“Very well.”

His message delivered, Halliday appeared to be on the point of retreating again, but Muriel had too lively a recol-

lection of her late sufferings to be able to see him depart without a struggle.

"Won't you come back with us to the house and let me introduce you to my aunt?" she said appealingly—more appealingly perhaps than she was herself aware.

To this suggestion Halliday readily assented, and they walked on together a little in front of the advancing host.

No solitude, it is frequently asserted, is so complete as that of a crowd, and although the crowd so spoken of was not probably intended to mean a large party of your nearest relations all with their eyes and ears wide open to catch your every tone and gesture, Muriel found that she and Halliday were able to exchange ideas not only with considerable comfort to themselves, and also without any of that awkward self-consciousness which had attended their last meeting. Of course she immediately inquired after Madame Cairioli, and

learned that some little improvement had taken place in her state since her removal to her new lodgings. He had received a letter that morning from Mr. Skellett, he told her, announcing, amongst other items of news, his own appointment to a living, not large indeed, but having the immeasurable advantage of removing him from his present surroundings. All this was satisfactory enough, the chief misfortune being that it came to an end but too soon, not many minutes having elapsed before Muriel once more found herself at the entrance to Bryonia Villa, with all the cousins, actual and prospective, grouped around her in excited conclave. This sudden rush of discordant voices seemed to awaken Halliday from his momentary oblivion, for he looked eagerly round as if in search of some way of exit. Muriel too had time to bethink her of the extreme undesirability of allowing anything like gossip

to get abroad amongst the present company, already only too much on the *qui vive* for anything of the sort. When, therefore, after a few minutes spent in the heated drawing-room, Halliday approached to take his leave, she made no effort to detain him, merely repeating her message to Lady Beachamp.

Mrs. Flack, however, was more hospitable.

"You'll stay tea, surely? It will be up in another minute," she exclaimed.

"No, thank you, indeed. I only came to bring this note to Miss Ellis," he answered.

"Well, all I can say is, you must come again, then; now you've found your way once it won't be difficult. There's croquet and lawn tennis every Tuesday and Friday, with tea and coffee, and wine too, of course, for the gentlemen; indeed, as you're going to stay at Chudleigh, Muriel,

you'd better bring the whole of them over one of these days," she continued, turning effusively to her niece.

"Unfortunately, Miss Ellis is not coming to Chudleigh," Halliday said, thus evading the question of his own future visits to Bryonia Villa.

"Not going?" Mrs. Flack exclaimed in a tone of astonishment. "Why, what's the meaning of that, Muriel? Ain't *they* even fine enough for you?"

"The meaning simply is, that I don't care to go, aunt; I don't wish to leave my grandfather," Muriel answered, colouring with vexation.

"Your grandfather, indeed! I never heard such stuff! Your grandfather never was better in his life."

"I don't think he is particularly well, aunt."

While this altercation was still going on, and while Halliday was still resisting a

suggestion on the part of Miss Letty that he should then and there join them in a game of lawn tennis, Mr. Augustus entered from the other room.

If Muriel flattered herself that any of her, as she thought very obvious, rebuffs had made the slightest impression upon that gentleman's consciousness, it was evident now that she was mistaken, any symptoms he had observed in that direction having been simply set down by him to an amiable desire on her part to avoid awakening the only too easily aroused jealousies of the susceptible Miss Fisher.

"She's off to church," he observed confidentially, approaching Muriel with an engaging smile, and his thumb pointed humorously in the direction of the door. "She's awfully religious, poor girl,—too much so for my taste, I'm bound to confess. However, I suppose it's all right, and I oughtn't to be the one to com-

plain. Anyhow, when the cat's away—you know the proverb; so come along into the garden, Muriel, and let me get you some plums. There ought to be some ripe by this."

"Thank you, but I really do not wish for any plums," she replied.

"Well, some flowers, then? There's none, I know, at grandfather's, and there's some roses here that will be the very thing for your hair. Don't refuse a good offer. How do you know you'll ever get another?"

"Thank you, Augustus, but indeed I prefer remaining indoors."

"Oh well, all right then. Perhaps we *are* snugger here;" and down the unabashed Gus plumped his substantial person upon the sofa beside her.

This was too much for Muriel. "I must be going, I am afraid, aunt," she said, getting up and approaching Mrs. Flack, who

was engaged in vigorously tugging at the bell-rope ; " I promised my grandfather not to be late, and it is nearly five o'clock now."

This time some inkling of her meaning did appear to have penetrated even the obtuse brain of the stalwart Augustus, for he sat staring after her, without attempting to follow. Fortunately, too, a diversion was just then effected by the entrance of the two young gentlemen, sharers with Mr. Sweetman in the pursuits of agriculture, and in the tumult which ensued Muriel managed to slip away comparatively unheeded.

At the entrance she found Halliday.

" You are riding, are you not ?" she inquired, glancing from the whip which he carried in his hand to the gravel sweep, where certainly not a symptom of a horse was visible.

" I rode from Chudleigh to Boldre," he answered, " but I left my horse there.

Ought I not to have done so?" he added, glancing at her with some apprehension.

Muriel hesitated. The reasons against seeing too much of her present companion, which had seemed so forcible a few days before, were certainly not a whit less forcible now. Certainly, too, or almost certainly, they would be seen walking away together by the party already assembled upon the tennis ground. On the other hand, she absolutely lacked the courage to go back and face again those discomforts from which she had just with such difficulty escaped. Moreover, after an hour of undiluted Flack society, the notion of a walk *tête-à-tête* with Halliday over the sunlit fields, and along the weed-fringed borders of the mere presented itself to her imagination as something distinctly desirable—presented itself, indeed, with a force which secretly not a little astonished her. The

result, at all events, of her momentary hesitation was to cause her to turn to him with a smile which certainly was not discouraging.

“I am very glad you have, because now we can walk back together,” she exclaimed.

CHAPTER IV.

AN OLD MAN'S SCHEME.

WHILE all this was going on, old John had come back from the fields, expecting to find his granddaughter returned, and, not finding her, vented his annoyance upon Mrs. Strong and Jabez, and every one in and about the house; finally, leaving the kitchen, he mounted to the gallery above, from one of the windows of which he could command a view of the road along which she would have to return, as well as over that part of the farm where he had left his men at work in the distant harvest fields.

Old John certainly was not what could

be called an ideal old man, nor was his an ideal old age either. He was as fond of Muriel probably as he was of anything in the world, but even that was not saying a very great deal. A hard, close-fisted man he had always been, and a hard, close-fisted man he was still. There was one thing, however, which Farmer Flack loved with no stinted or niggard love, and that was his own land—the meadows he had sown, the ditches he had made, the fields he had ploughed. As a miser loves his gold, as a woman loves her firstborn, as many a man loves himself, so old John loved his land. Times had been bad with him lately, but it had not succeeded in extinguishing his love. It was, indeed, past extinguishing; a thing striking down to the very roots of the old man's being.

The farm was his own, practically, at all events, for it was not long since he

had renewed the lease, and there was many a year of it yet to run. The house, too, was his own absolutely, to give or to leave to whom he would, but that he cared comparatively little about. It was not the house, but the land—the solid ground, the acres—these were the things his heart-strings clung to. Most of all he cared for what he himself had captured and brought into subjection. There was that big pasture where the willows grew. Why, in his father's time, that had been for months at a time under water; and look at it now! Out beyond the mere, again, was another big field, which thirty years ago had been covered with heather, and where he himself remembered shooting more than one brace of snipes as a boy, and now there wasn't such a field for turnips in the whole parish of Essant. It was gall and wormwood to old John to think of dying and leaving all this;

above all, to think of leaving it to Thomas, his son, who had carped at his father's old-fashioned ways, and who would bring his steam rollers, and his steam ploughs, and all his new-fangled devices, to rout out the land, and to turn everything topsy turvy ; worst of all, who would bring his wife, the woman with the red face and loud voice, who more than any other being in the world John detested. Deep down in the old man's mind a scheme had been slowly hatching, hatching. He had not yet confided it to any one ; he had not yet, indeed, fully matured it ; but it was there, and it only wanted a little more time, and possibly also a little more opposition, in order to bring it to maturity.

After a while he got tired of waiting for Muriel, and went downstairs, and out to the edge of the mere. In former years John had owed many a bitter grudge against that mere. Of what use was it except to

bring people idling about his fields, catching their foolish fish, and trampling upon his grass? Once or twice it had overflowed its banks, and had done him a world of harm. He had longed to drain it, and to plant his turnips and potatoes where the big pike lounged about at their leisure at the bottom. Now, however, he felt a certain regard even for the mere. It could do him no more harm; its grey face was the first thing he remembered, and it would probably be the last thing he should see on earth; why, then, should he bear any further spite against it? Presently he paused again at a spot where a small sluice gate, once forming part of an old eel trap, let down the water in a series of gradual gushes into the lake. Out beyond the ripples he could see the red reflection of his own farmhouse, all its quaint gables and thin chimney-stacks repeated, brick for

brick, in its surface. Water-hens and bald coots swam to and fro across the reflection, and now and then a fish rose, leaving a wide circle of wrinkles behind it. Nearer an old plank, bound with iron, and now rotten with age, projected far out into the still water. A small boy, one of his carters' sons, was standing upon this plank, and fishing for gudgeons with a bent pin. It reminded old John of a little brother of his who had died when he himself was little more than a lad. He had not thought of his brother, he was sure, for nigh upon half a century, yet now he remembered everything about him; the very colour of his hair and the sort of pranks they used to play together. He even remembered one particular occasion when he and Hal had wriggled their way through the big hay-stack, and how he, being the biggest, had stuck fast, and how Hal had tried to pull him out by

the feet, and how their father had come up and had thrashed them both. Then he thought of another Hal—his own son—poor Hal, what a fool he was! what an idiot! what a hopeless ninny! After all, though, there were worse things in the world, the old man thought, than even fools. There was such a thing as people being too sharp, too cute about their own interests. He'd rather like to see poor Hal again; Muriel was always at him about it, why shouldn't he tell her to write and bid him come and make it all up? Then he began to wonder whether he could be going to be sick; it was a new notion for him to be filling his mind with these sort of fads and follies; people were apt to get soft and silly before they were sick, he had heard.

Presently he saw his granddaughter coming down the path. Had she been alone, he would have gone to meet her,

but, seeing Halliday, he turned away again towards the house. Muriel, however, saw him, and ran forward, passing her hand affectionately through his arm.

"I am afraid you've been kept waiting, grandfather, but I couldn't get away sooner. I'm so sorry," she said.

"I told you not to go," the old man said irritably.

By this time Halliday, too, had come up, so she turned towards him.

"This is Mr. Halliday, Sir Anthony Beachamp's nephew, grandfather," she said.

Halliday held out his hand, and old Flack took it in his horny fist, eyeing him suspiciously at the same time out of his small, deep-sunk eyes. Was he coming after Muriel? he wondered. Was he trying to get hold of her money? He was a parson, too, and John hated parsons. Still, as he was there, and as he was a friend of his granddaughter's, and a gentle-

man, and had nothing to say to the Thomas Flacks, the old man felt bound to offer him hospitality.

“ You’ll maybe come in, and sit down, sir ? ” he said gruffly.

Halliday signified his consent, and they walked back to the farmhouse together. It was long past five now, and tea (another tribute to Muriel’s gentility) was set out on the big table in the outer room. Blue plates, heaped with slices of bread-and-butter, stood upon the bare table ; at the upper end, however, a cloth was laid, and here was a teapot, with cups, and a hot cake, which Mrs. Strong had made that afternoon in Muriel’s honour. The evenings were already closing in so rapidly that coming out of the bright light the room seemed almost dark, the high narrow windows hardly affording any light. A small wood fire, however, was burning briskly in the big black-throated chimney ;

some red rugs, which Muriel herself had brought down upon one of her previous visits, lending a comfortable tone to the semi-obscurity. Old John sat himself down in one of the big wooden settles, the guest also seated himself in another, while Muriel went to and fro arranging matters to her liking. To Halliday—especially after the conversation that morning at Chudleigh—the scene was a very curious one. He was not, we know, susceptible to the artistic side of things, and consequently the beauty and ancient grace of the place, which to Muriel shed such a halo over everything, was utterly lost upon him. In his eyes it was simply a common farmhouse, larger, perhaps, but also rougher and less well-furnished than most. How did she put up with it? he wondered as he saw her moving about, arranging the tablecloth here, shifting the tea-things there, lending a helping hand to all the simple

homely arrangements. Surely it must be very strange and awkward and uncomfortable to her?—this old man, homely to the brink of vulgarity; this rough plenty; this utter absence of all the thousand and one comforts she was accustomed to elsewhere. To Halliday, brought up in a *bourgeois* household, where material luxury was the one test and standard of everything, all this seemed indeed a terrible derogation, one which he could have put up with well enough, himself, but which it vaguely shocked him to think of her enduring. It was not even as if Muriel was a visitor merely—one of a superior rank condescending to people separated from her by a whole world of class and class distinctions—no, wonderful as it seemed, these people were really her own relations; that heavy, uneducated old man was her grandfather; those appallingly vulgar people they had just left were her uncles, and aunts, and

cousins. Surely, he thought, she must feel horribly ashamed of them ? or if not, did it not argue a great and rare, nay, an almost inconceivable amount of magnanimity on her part ? Halliday had known for a long time back that he loved Muriel Ellis, but never perhaps before had he known *how* deeply he loved her until he saw her to-day under this battered, time-darkened old roof, which owned John Flack for its master.

The meal ended, she took him round to exhibit all the homely lions of the place. The old carved chair which she herself had routed out from a lumber room ; the spinet in its painted case, whose ancient keys emitted a dull mysterious rattle when you struck on them ; the doors studded with huge iron nails, and fastened with a bobbin and latch in true fairy-tale fashion ; the bit of plaster high up on the wall with the initials of a former owner, and the

date 1600 scratched upon it with a nail. Halliday, to tell the truth, was not particularly impressed by any of these properties, which seemed to him very musty and uninspiring. He looked at them all, however, obediently, as he would have looked at anything, no matter what, which Muriel might have taken into her head to point out to him. Then they went out at the back door, which opened upon a delicious tangle of apple and hazel trees, with currant bushes and here and there a few poppies and tiger lilies, one great trunk of horse-chestnut emerging whitely from the hedge beyond, its broad five-fingered leaves stretching far out over the moss-stained roof. Presently old John appeared with his unlit pipe in his hand, and Muriel made him sit down on the bench, returning herself to the house for a light.

“You don’t smoke, sir, I suppose?” the

old fellow said to Halliday. "Parsons don't, I believe. They thinks it wicked"—with a malicious grin.

"I'm not much of a smoker generally, but if you'll give me a pipe now I'll smoke it with you with pleasure," Halliday answered, eager to clear himself from so invidious a charge.

If he had no scruple about smoking, however, there was another indulgence to which he did not yield without many and very serious misgivings. What right had he to be sitting there, after all his resolutions to the contrary? he asked himself. Like most men under similar temptation, however, he stifled the voice of conscience, and told himself that as it was the last time, absolutely the very last time, and as he must inevitably be leaving in a very few minutes, it could not really matter so very much one way or other.

Presently in effect the church clock began to strike six, and he got up reluctantly to take his leave.

"I am to tell Lady Beachamp that you cannot come, then?" he said as he approached Muriel.

"What's that?" old John asked before she had time to answer. "What can't you do, Muriel?"

"Go to Chudleigh, grandfather. Lady Beachamp was kind enough to ask me to go there next week."

"And why can't you go? What hinders you?"

"Well I would rather stay with you, grandfather. I came here to be with you, not to pay visits."

"Chut, nonsense! What has that got to do with it? Go, girl, go. You needn't stay any longer than you like, but go; 'twill do you good."

"I don't think that I want any par-

ticular good done to me," she answered, smiling. "I am perfectly well."

"You'll be none the better for being moped in this dull place, that I tell you. Besides, it's only proper you should go; and if I want you, I'll send for you fast enough, so that you may take your oath."

Muriel resisted a little longer, but the old man had so evidently set his heart upon her going that she did not like to vex him by persisting. Instead, therefore, of a refusal, it ended by Halliday taking back word that Miss Ellis was much obliged, would have great pleasure in joining the party at Chudleigh upon the following Tuesday.

After he had gone the other two sat for some time longer amongst the deepening shadows, watching the light as it gradually faded out and died in a broad dusky reddish haze above the distant firs. Muriel's thoughts had launched themselves upon

a long excursion, a private voyage of discovery, from which they were brought back by a sudden question from her grandfather.

"Now, that chap that was here just now—has he got aught of his own, do you suppose, over and above what they give him for his preaching?" he asked.

"Mr. Halliday? I don't know. His father, I believe, is rich, but there is said to have been some disagreement between them."

"Humph!"

After this there was another long silence, at the end of which Muriel was about to propose an adjournment to the house, when old John put forward another query.

"Did you ever hear tell that he knew aught of farming?" he asked.

"Never," she answered, not a little surprised at the question. "Indeed, I am pretty sure that he does not."

"That's a pity." John Flack got up and shook the ashes carefully out of his pipe on to the window sill. "Maybe, though, he might learn," he added meditatively. Then he went indoors, leaving Muriel to digest these oracular utterances at her leisure.

CHAPTER V.

NEW SCENES, A DINNER, AND A PORTRAIT.

THERE was one obstacle—a very prosaic one—against going to stay at Chudleigh, which, though it had no share in her original refusal, occurred to Muriel's mind with some little force after she had rather reluctantly given her consent, and that was neither more nor less than the want of any suitable wearing apparel. In coming to stay with her grandfather she was always careful to limit her impedimenta as much as might be, partly from a rather weak-minded dread of being thought “fine,” partly on account of those practical difficulties in the matter of receptacles,

to which allusion has already been made. As neither of these, however, could well be urged now as reasons for drawing back from her present engagement, it followed that the only alternative was to write to London desiring that a box containing certain specified garments should be sent to meet her upon Tuesday, by a certain specified train in the afternoon. To this train accordingly Muriel went, only to find, of course, that the box had not yet arrived. After nearly an hour's waiting, however, and a good deal of telegraphing to and fro the line, it appeared at length by a later one, having been detained for no possible or assignable reason at the junction. All this occasioned so much delay that when she at last arrived at Chudleigh the whole party were found to have adjourned to their rooms to dress, and it was as much as she could do to get through her own

dressing in time, only reaching the drawing-room door, in fact, just as the second gong was sounding for dinner.

Here all the party were found to be assembled—with the exception, that is, of Halliday, for whom at first she looked in vain. There was a tolerably numerous assemblage of men, chiefly of sporting denominations, but the only lady besides herself and the ladies of the house appeared to be a certain Lady McClusky, widow, so she was informed, of a late ambassador or minister, who appeared to have been everywhere and to have seen everything, and who at the moment of her own entrance was conversing loudly to their host upon the subject of the late Burmese treaty. Lady McClusky was a tall, gaunt-looking woman, with high cheek bones, and a pronounced Scotch accent, which none of her various wanderings seemed to have subdued, and which came out with peculiar

effect in the foreign tongues with which her conversation was considerably adorned. Amongst the masculine portion of the guests Muriel quickly perceived Roger Hyde, who on his part came forward with much effusion to greet her. While she was still talking to him Halliday entered. Instead of coming towards her, however, he merely bowed, and remained standing amongst the crowd of men assembled near the doorway. A minute later her attention was claimed by her host, by whom, rather to her own surprise, she was led away to dinner, the *ci-devant* ambassadress following immediately in the rear.

At table she found herself seated between her host and Hyde, and not far from Miss Beachamp, looking regal in a dark red velvet, cut square at the throat, and though severe to rigidity as regards style, still many degrees less unbecoming

than her usual morning apparel. Perhaps it was owing to this circumstance that Muriel was struck afresh with her beauty, which certainly seemed to her even more incontestable than she had originally supposed. It was not a style, however, which appeared to require much from accessories; on the contrary, to be massive, statuesque, self-centred, like hers whose beauty "launched a thousand ships and burned the topless towers of Illium." If contrast, too, was wanting, it certainly was provided by the kitten-like curves and pink and white prettinesses of her step-mother, whose small fascinations were at present directed against a stout, imperturbable-looking peer, whom Muriel had heard addressed before dinner as Lord Stark.

Turning to make a remark to Hyde she was struck by his glance, which, like her own, had been directed across the table,

and now rested on Lena Beachamp with rather more—so, at least, Muriel fancied—than merely cousinly admiration. Before there was time, however, to detect its meaning—if meaning there was to detect—it had changed and transferred itself to her.

“She is looking well to-night, isn’t she?” he remarked, nodding significantly across the table.

“Yes, indeed,” she answered warmly. “It is a pleasure to look at anything so handsome—and so unconscious,” she added.

“Unconscious? I believe you! There is not a spice of vanity in her whole composition—more’s the pity!”

Muriel smiled. “What a masculine sentiment,” she said. “As if a woman any more than a man was the better for being vain!”

“They are better—to us,” he answered, smiling too. “Another masculine senti-

ment says one woman never cordially admires another. That, I observe, you are also prepared to contest, Miss Ellis, unless, of course, you are the one proverbial exception which proves the rule."

"A rule? oh, but that is no rule at all," she exclaimed indignantly; "it is a mere confession of incompetency — an attempt to veil their own ignorance of the subject; besides, even admitting that there was something in the charge, as an artist, you know, I am officially bound to admire beauty wherever I see it," she added.

"By the way, that word artist reminds me of something—something I am sure you will be able to tell me. What has become of our illustrious friend Wygram? I had occasion to write to him from Scotland some little time ago upon a matter of business, and I have never received a single line in answer. Is he in London, do you know? or, if not, where?"

Muriel felt herself colouring guiltily.

"I believe Mr. Wygram has gone to America," she said in as indifferent a tone as she could muster.

"To America? Wasn't that a sudden thought? he didn't seem to have a notion of it the last time I met him."

"Yes, I fancy it was rather a sudden thought," she answered, wishing that he would be good enough to choose some other subject of conversation; wishing, too, that Halliday, whom she saw amongst the crowd of young men at the farthest end of the table, would turn, so that she might make out what it was that had altered in him since their meeting a few days before. In the pause Lady McClusky's voice was heard discoursing loudly to her neighbour on the subject of volcanoes; she was perfectly sure that Mowna Kaah was higher than Mowna Roa; she had not been up the latter, but she had been

up the former, and she knew that it was the highest. However, it would be easy, she said, to settle the point; she would only have to refer to an entry to that effect in her diary.

“A diary? oh, do you keep a diary?” exclaimed Lady Beachamp, who, having failed to elicit anything from her uncommunicative neighbour, was now evidently dying for an occasion to address herself to the table at large. “I am so dreadfully afraid of people who keep diaries,” she continued. “I have an aunt who writes down every single thing the people about her are doing, and what you say, and what you’ve got on. I assure you I feel so nervous whenever I go to see her I never know whether I’m on my head or my heels, and all the time I’m talking to her I’m thinking how the things will sound when they’re written down; and as she’s very clever and knows

quantities of people, I'm certain it will all be published when she dies, and there one will be in print for ever and ever, with all the little ill-natured things one has said of other people. I said as much to her one day. I said, 'I do hope, my dear aunt, that you've given orders to have all your diaries burnt when you die, as it will be so extremely uncomfortable for me if you don't.'"

"And what did she say to that?" inquired Hyde, who, like the rest of the company, had suspended his own conversation in order to give ear to these engaging remarks.

"Oh, she only sniffed and said, *I* needn't be afraid, that she hadn't written down anything *I* said; which wasn't civil, ~~or~~ true either, for I've often seen her laugh at the things I've told her, and I'm sure they've all gone down in the book. If I was her, I couldn't sleep a wink in my bed at night

thinking of all those volumes and volumes. Why one might die at any time before one had time to give directions about them, and then there you'd be !”

“There you wouldn't be, you mean,” suggested her husband.

“Well, yes, there you wouldn't be. But isn't it dreadful ? I call it positively wicked. People have no right to make others so uncomfortable. Now, have they, Lord Stark ?”

“I hope you have never been guilty of keeping a diary, Miss Ellis ?” Sir Anthony said, turning with grave politeness to his neighbour.

“Never,” she answered, laughing. “I am afraid I should have nothing to put in it, if I did. I have literally never been anywhere or seen anything. The only expedition I ever made in my life was this spring, and that was only as far as to Hampshire.”

"You met my nephew there, I think?"

"Yes, I met Mr. Halliday several times." She thought that he was going to add something to this; but all he said was—

"We must tell Lady Beachamp, then; it will be a comfort to her, I am sure, to know that she has nothing to fear from you."

Not very long after this a move was made, and the ladies adjourned to the drawing room. Here the *ci-devant* ambassadress begged permission to retire to the writing-table, presumably for the purpose of posting herself up in her diary, while Muriel sat listening to an interminable monologue poured out by Lady Beachamp upon the subject of her dresses, her relations, her servants, the guests she expected, and the guests she did not expect; finally, of her dresses again; Lena Beachamp, meanwhile, sitting aloof with an

air of immeasurable scorn and superiority. Much as she was disposed to like that young lady personally, Muriel could not help thinking that as regards her small stepmother she really was needlessly defiant. It seemed a waste of good ammunition to expend so much fine wrath and dissatisfaction upon anything so slight and inconsequent as Lady Beachamp. The latter, indeed, reminded her not a little of her own—also somewhat inconsequent—friend, Kitty King; a comparison not to the advantage, she decided, of her present hostess, who, if she could lay claim to certain social graces which Kitty lacked, on the other hand was quite without that strong spice of mother-wit which flavoured Kitty's silliest speeches, and hindered even her very vanity from ever degenerating into mere fatuity. Muriel had not been long enough acquainted with the mistress of Chudleigh to venture upon

surmising to what depths her folly was capable on occasion of descending, but from what she had already seen she had a shrewd suspicion that it would require a very long plummet indeed to get to the bottom of it.

When, after a considerable delay, the gentlemen began to straggle in, she looked round for Halliday, believing that now at least he would take the opportunity of approaching her. Again, however, he unaccountably neglected to do so, and the vacant chair was promptly seized upon by Conroy Beachamp, who seated himself with the air of a man not easily to be persuaded that any other society could be preferable to his own. Muriel was disappointed, and her disappointment probably made her unjust, or else she was in the mood for discovering likenesses, for it immediately struck her that a decided similarity existed between this

complacent young gentleman and her own little-loved cousin, Augustus Flack. Given the advantages of position, and Augustus might have been another Conroy; take those advantages away again, and her present companion would have been very little if anything less unendurable than the redoubtable Gus.

The evening was not particularly remarkable in any way. Lady Beachamp sang some French songs with not much expression and still less correctness, after which followed games of cards, Lady McClusky exhibiting that shrewd caution and keen eye for business which doubtless distinguished her Scotch ancestry; at the end of which time the whole party adjourned to bed.

Next morning Muriel was up betimes, her recent stay at the farm having so inoculated her with early habits that she found it impossible to remain in bed, and,

once up, the beauty of the morning made it equally impossible to remain in the house. Having made her way with some difficulty through the various locked doors leading in and out of the conservatory, she found herself upon the upper terrace, where she wandered to and fro, inhaling the fresh morning scents, and contemplating with no slight self-approval the various closed shutters and blinds which told that for most of the inmates of the house the day had not yet begun. If human society, however, was wanting there was no lack of other, indeed one of the pleasantest features to Muriel of her present abode was the extraordinary number of pets, especially birds, which thronged its vicinity; ever since an early hour that morning her ears had been saluted by the soft thunder of pigeons cooing from the eaves, or alighting on her window-sill, and now, as she descended the steps leading from the house

to the terrace, a regular rush was made towards her of peacocks and peahens, guinea-fowl, silver pheasants, all of whom seemed to take it as a matter of course that she would forthwith proceed to cater for their benefit.

She was just speculating as to whether she might or might not venture into the dining-room in search of some bread, when Miss Beachamp was seen approaching through the conservatory with a basket on her arm, and she moved forward immediately to meet her. As she did so another door to the right opened, and Roger Hyde appeared upon the scene, with the air of a man who is conscious of having performed an heroic effort, and naturally expects to reap a corresponding reward. Muriel fancied that his face assumed a slightly crestfallen expression at sight of herself, but if so he effaced it dexterously, and all three addressed them-

selves with much unanimity to the task of catering to the clamorous wants of the throng of applicants which crowded the walk and steps.

The first supply becoming presently exhausted without any diminution of the clamour, Lena Beachamp departed to the house in search of a second, refusing, with characteristic curtness, to allow Hyde to do so instead of her.

While she was away Muriel turned to him with a smile.

“Mr. Hyde, I want you to help me in a little plot,” she said confidentially. “No, don’t look so alarmed; it is nothing very serious,” she added. “It is only that I want very much to get Miss Beachamp to sit for me, and I want you to help me. Will you?”

His face brightened. “But what a good—what an excellent idea,” he exclaimed. “Help you? of course I will.

Do you know that there's not as much as a scrap of likeness of her extant—not even a photograph. She has always set her face against being done.”

“We must only hope she won't set her face against me, then.”

“She will unless we approach the subject very warily. Let me see. I know of a room that will be the very thing—north light—one window—hardly any furniture—out of every one's way. Don't say another word; I'll arrange it for you. Hush! here she comes.”

He was as good as his word. After breakfast Muriel was duly ushered into a room off Sir Anthony's study, where the light and other conditions were all that had been depicted, and into which she forthwith conveyed her painting paraphernalia, including a small canvas which she happened fortunately to have brought with her.

The next thing was to secure the model—from Hyde's account likely to prove a task of some magnitude. Miss Beachamp, however, submitted with less difficulty than might have been expected, only stipulating that it was not to take long, and that no one was to be admitted during the sitting. To both these conditions Muriel willingly assented, and, having got her subject into the proper light, set to work without further loss of time. She had just finished the outline, and was beginning to get in the colours, when Roger Hyde's head was seen at the entrance.

“Go away; go directly. Don't you know you're not allowed to come in here?” Lena exclaimed.

“I'm not staying. I only came to—— Good heavens! Miss Ellis, you're not painting her in that collar and coat, are you?” he cried, breaking off in the middle of his apologies.

“Do you think I know Miss Beachamp long enough to venture upon suggesting any alteration in her dress?” she inquired in a tone of amusement.

“My collar? What on earth is the matter with my collar?” that young lady herself inquired indignantly. “Do you mean to say that it is not clean?” she continued, addressing her cousin.

“Clean, my dear Lena! What has its cleanliness to say to the matter? It and your whole dress are hideously, appallingly unbecoming—the very last things you of all people in the world ought to wear.”

“And what would you suggest my wearing, pray? A wampum belt, or a string of cowries?”

“I would have you wear whatever was harmonious and becoming; whatever was deeply, and richly, and generously toned—the tones of sunset clouds and Venetian

feluccas—as for those sort of hideous, colourless, semi-masculine abominations, they are enough to set any man of feeling's teeth on edge !”

“ Now, look here, Roger, I am not going to be dictated to by you. You may dress yourself and your mantelpieces in the colours of sunset clouds if you like, but you'll please to leave me and my clothes alone !”

“ But, my dear Lena—— ”

“ Once for all, Roger, if you do not go away at once, I'll not sit at all ; so there's an end of it.”

“ Yes, please, please go away, Mr. Hyde,” Muriel said despairingly. “ We shall never get on, if you don't.”

Thus adjured on all sides, Hyde at last departed, and the two young ladies were left alone. He had not, however, evidently gone very far ; indeed, it seemed probable that he must have been peeping in

through some window or key-hole, for about an hour later he suddenly made a rush forward, just as Muriel was about to place some fresh colour upon her canvas, and caught her unceremoniously by the hand.

"Excuse me," he exclaimed breathlessly. "But let me implore you—on my knees, if you require it—not to add another stroke. Begin again, if you like. Paint another—twenty others, if you choose—but don't, in Heaven's name, add another line to that. It is perfect—as far as it goes, it is a masterpiece!"

"As far as it goes! you may well say that," she replied in a tone of dissatisfaction. "A masterpiece? Why, it is only just begun. How can you ask me, Mr. Hyde, to leave a thing in that state?"

"Never mind; some things are notoriously better when they are only half done,

and this one would not be improved, believe me, if you were to go on working at it for the next twenty years. Would it?" he added, appealing to Sir Anthony, who had just entered from his own study.

"Without presuming to say that, I may certainly venture upon saying that it is remarkably good," that gentleman said critically.

Under this weight of commendation, Muriel laid down her palette, and, getting up from her chair, moved back, so as to command a fuller view of her own work. As Hyde said, it certainly was good—as far as it went. Half the canvas was still untouched, the obnoxious collar in particular being barely indicated, but the head was massively blocked in, and the likeness admirable; without being idealized, it had much of the charm of an ideal portrait, a result which by some happy

accident its very incompleteness seemed to enhance.

"You really would advise my leaving it as it is?" she said to Hyde.

"Certainly. How can a thing be better than perfect? Ten to one you would spoil it if you went on."

"That does not speak very well for your belief in my powers," Muriel answered, smiling.

"On the contrary, my belief in your powers transcends all expression," he exclaimed enthusiastically. "Though, by the way, your manner of painting appears to me to be decidedly faulty," he added, by way of a sort of afterthought.

"Well, the sitting is at an end, and that at least is a blessing!" Lena Beachamp exclaimed, springing up from her chair. And, without even bestowing a glance in passing at the picture, she opened a door and ran down the steps on to the ter-

race, calling loudly to her dogs as she did so.

Hyde followed, and Muriel and her host were left alone.

"It really is a wonderful bit of portraiture," the latter said, scanning the canvas narrowly.

"Then, please, please accept it, Sir Anthony," Muriel said eagerly. "I don't think anything so unfinished is really worth offering, but still as you do like it——"

He looked surprised, so surprised that for a moment she fancied he was offended. Apparently this was not, however, the case. Picking up one of the wet brushes which lay on the table, he offered it to her with a bow.

—"Add to your favour, then, by writing your name on it," he said, indicating a bare spot on the canvas. "And write me down at the same time, my dear Miss Ellis, your extremely obliged and grateful

servant," he added, with another and a profounder bow.

When, an hour later, Lady Beachamp heard of the affair, she was anything, however, but particularly pleased.

"If she had wanted to make you a present of somebody's picture, it ought to have been *mine*, not Lena's," she said to her husband with a pout. "People are always given presents of their wife's pictures, not their daughter's—at least, not that I ever heard of. Of course, Miss Ellis mayn't consider *me* worth painting"—with another and a more pronounced pout. "Still, even so, I think under the circumstances that it was extremely bad taste on her part—particularly in one's own house."

"On the contrary, I think that it showed remarkable discernment," her husband replied. "Miss Ellis knows perfectly well that in the natural course of events I shall some day lose Lena's society, when

obviously her portrait will become of value. Whereas your society, my love," he continued suavely, "I hope to be happy enough to retain always."

CHAPTER VI.

REVELATIONS.

THE first strangeness a little worn off, Muriel began to discover that she highly appreciated her new surroundings. This smooth, well-ordered, even-flowing, country-house life came to her as a sort of discovery, and seemed to fill up a gap of which before she had hardly been aware. Although the days of anything like real pinch and privation lay a long way back in our heroine's past, it had somehow never been her lot to lead the sort of gilded, care-defying life which to these people about her seemed to be the merest matter of course. While with the Prettymans

her life and circle had naturally been their life and circle, ameliorated doubtless a little by the money which had flowed to her from poor John's disused stores, but still essentially a narrow one; restricted sociably, morally, intellectually, in every way, in fact, in which a circle can be restricted. Even after she had set up house and home of her own, it had been much the same; there had been art, it is true, and a certain amount of artistic expansion, still it had been emphatically a grey ungilded life, with work, and little besides work to enliven it. It sometimes struck her now that she had got too much into the habit of taking everything greyly and seriously—of looking at everything too exclusively from the one standpoint; the standpoint from which leisure stands as the equivalent of idleness, and idleness of sin and perdition. Never before had she been anywhere either where

the mere prosaic facts of existence, the ordinary eatings and drinkings, comings and goings, became in themselves enjoyable. Even the extremely motley and composite character of her surroundings seemed rather to enhance than diminish this charm. The grave, courteous, somewhat sardonic host; his restless, egotistical little *poseuse* of a wife; Lena, with her romantic face and eminently unromantic speeches; the easy, pleasant-mannered young men. Even the very incongruity of the background—the Moorish hall, with its preposterously garish walls, and begilt and betwisted columns; its *prie-dieux* copied from one foreign chapel, and its candlesticks and draperies borrowed from another; the drawing-rooms and galleries, where meek-eyed Madonnas and undraped nymphs, buhl cabinets, and chippendale chairs, met together in happy reunion; the brown ancestors overhead, looking stolidly down at all the newest

fads and follies of their descendants. Little attractive as these things sound when thus dryly and coldly catalogued, they somehow pleased Muriel, and gave her a new sense of life and colour and pictorial expansion. One thing, however, did not at all please her, and indeed went far to spoil everything, and that was the, to her unaccountable, avoidance which Halliday continued to manifest towards herself. Over the cause of this she racked her brains in vain. Could she have unintentionally offended him? she wondered, or did he so repent that momentary gleam of kindness as to have resolved henceforth to punish both himself and her by abstaining from even the commonest civilities of ordinary friendly intercourse? Amongst the catalogue of Muriel's faults coquetry, and an overweening desire to attract the opposite sex, had never hitherto figured very largely; now, however, for

the first time in her life, she felt tempted to bring even these well-worn feminine artilleries to the rescue, if, by so doing, she could break down this foolish, senseless (so she herself stigmatized it) quarrel or alienation, which had so unaccountably sprung up between them. Not much time, however, was given her for trying the effect of these or any similar machinations, for, on the second morning after her arrival, she found, on coming down to breakfast, that Halliday had left Chudleigh by an early train, and was not expected back until Saturday, in time to redeem a promise of taking the services on Sunday, thereby affording the rector the opportunity of a long-desired run to the seaside.

Whatever effect this departure may have had upon herself, it certainly could not be said to weigh seriously upon the spirits of the rest of the party. Every one appeared in the happiest mood, Hyde especially

being more than usually vivacious, and fertile in small devices for making the days flow swiftly. The weather, too, was at its best—a sort of mellow foretaste of autumn, neither all gloom nor all glare—and riding and driving in all directions over the country became the order of the day. Norfolk is not generally supposed to rank very highly amongst English counties in point of picturesqueness, nevertheless it was surprising what a number of eminently attractive and sketchable points of view seemed to be discoverable within a moderate riding distance of Chudleigh. Muriel had early confessed to being anything but a finished horsewoman, but this, in the present condition of the Chudleigh stables, Miss Beachamp had declared to be an advantage rather than otherwise. At all events, an animal was forthcoming which she found no particular difficulty in mastering, any slight nervousness she might have felt

being more than outdone by Conroy, who never ceased uttering loud protestations as to his own insuperable terrors, and distaste for anything but the very mildest and least adventurous forms of equestrianism. Without entirely overcoming her original prejudice against that facetious young gentleman, Muriel was obliged to admit that as a riding and walking companion he stood the test with remarkable credit—no slight one either considering the frequency with which circumstances caused them to be thrown together. The regular shooting guests had by this time left, and as Lady McClusky never rode, and Lady Beachamp much preferred driving, the other four were left free to follow their own devices, which generally led them to embark upon long sauntering rides, along lanes whose hedges were beginning to deck themselves with their autumn livery, and across moors where the rabbits scampered away before

them by myriads, and an occasional curlew or plover rose with a quick whirring of wings from the heather. One of these expeditions took them to Boldre mere, where Muriel adjourned to the farmhouse, while the other three embarked upon the lake, avowedly for the purpose of catching pike. When she returned, however, about half an hour later she found that Miss Beachamp had come ashore again, and was sitting waiting for her close to where that small stream, of which mention has before been made, escaped into the mere.

Muriel sat down beside her, choosing for her own seat one end of the broad beam or plank which spanned the disused eel-trap. Below, the water gushed through the woodwork in a dozen spouting rills, filling the whole air with its fresh boggy scent. In front the mere was edged with a double or treble frontier of reeds and bulrushes,

with an outer border of white water crow-foot, whose pale starry blossoms fluttered like excited butterflies as the small stream ripples smote against them. An old punt, waterlogged and useless, just showed its rim above the surface ; further on the remains of what in the happier days of the farm had been a boathouse, lay rotting away, its walls deep in moss and green slime. The day was marvellously still ; so still that except in the immediate neighbourhood of the stream not a ripple was discernible. Huge grey and white cumuli stood heaped in massive magnificence above the horizon, their shadows, slowly travelling over the surface, now darkening and now leaving clear the small islands of weeds and water-lilies, which nearly filled the shallows. It was a lovely moment in a lovely season, and although to Muriel the charm of Boldre Mere was of course no novelty, there was something unusually and

to her indescribably delightful to-day in its wide sleep-suggesting expanse, and glittering weed-fringed shores ; the beautiful silence, the faintly indicated autumnal colouring, and leisurely moving lights and shadows making the spot and moment a thing to remember. Lena Beachamp, who seldom indulged in enthusiasm upon any subject, presently turned away, however, from the sleeping expanse before her, and pointed with her riding-whip to where the small lantern-covered top of Essant church just showed above some poplars.

"That's what father wants Steeny to take," she said, with her usual curtness of diction.

"Essant church, really? I knew the living was vacant, but I did not know that it was in Sir Anthony's gift," Muriel answered, in a tone of surprise.

"Didn't you? Oh yes, and he won't fill

it up either because he has set his mind on Steeny taking it. We've all, in fact, been at him about it; but he won't—I can't conceive why."

"Perhaps he thinks he is of more use where he is," Muriel suggested.

"Not a bit. If he did one could understand it better, though even then I should call it great folly; but he says himself that he is not doing any particular good—that any one else would do the work as well or better; and we all know he loathes the place—as who wouldn't?—and yet there he sticks. Really when a good man—and I suppose Steeny is better than most—takes an obstinate fit he's worse than any one—much worse!"

Miss Beachamp got up as she finished speaking, and walked away to where the boat was just approaching the shore, Roger Hyde waving his arms in triumph as he displayed—carefully balanced at a con-

siderable distance from his person—an extremely small fish, the result of their hour's toil.

Muriel sat still on her plank thinking of what she had just heard, staring at the scene before her, at the lake and the boat and the fish, but not seeing anything very distinctly. All the way back she was rather silent, Conroy's liveliest sallies failing to evoke more than a very disjointed and spiritless rejoinder, and when they reached the house one of the first things she heard was that Stephen Halliday had just returned.

The next day was Sunday—not a day at all of rigid observances at Chudleigh. One point, however, Sir Anthony did stand out for, and that was that there should be no malingering on the subject of morning church. Although nominally in the parish of Essant the church the Beachamps attended was not Essant church, but another,

and a smaller one which stood in the actual park. The distance was so trifling, therefore, that the rule was for every one to walk there and back; a rule to which Lady Beachamp, however, who detested walking, formed an exception, her own particular phaeton being invariably in attendance, wherewith to convey herself and any guest who could be induced to say that the distance was either too great or her fears of wet feet too pressing. On this occasion Muriel was the victim, Lady McClusky having come down with an apparatus of cloaks and goloshes, which would have made any such suggestion in her direction a mockery. She did not, therefore, see anything of Halliday until she saw him in church, and even then at first only by transitory glimpses, the Chudleigh pew, like others of the same date, having been apparently constructed with the view of enabling its occupants to know

as little of what might be going on about them as need be. The pulpit, however, as it happened, exactly faced the pew, so that on mounting into it Halliday found himself exposed to the full fire of his relations' eyes and criticisms. As the reader is already aware, preaching was not an exercise in which he either excelled, or—perhaps a more striking phenomena—held himself to excel; and on the present occasion the sermon might have passed for the counterpart of that first and only one which Muriel had ever heard from his lips—a matter-of-fact enunciation, namely, of what are commonly called first principles, unenlivened by any particular graces of style or delivery. As an effort of oratory it certainly could not be called successful, still for all that Muriel liked it. There was something rather fine, she thought, in a man standing up there to enunciate such very well-worn truisms, with

such an evidently fervent conviction as to their permanent and perennial applicability. If this was her opinion, however, it clearly was not that of other members of the congregation ; indeed, on glancing back into the pew she detected Mr. Conroy in the act of telegraphing a wild pantomime to his opposite neighbour expressive of anything but admiration for his cousin's powers as a preacher ; a performance which had the effect of then and there undoing the result of nearly a week's assiduity, and re-establishing that much too discriminating young gentleman in the originally low position which he occupied in our unreasonable heroine's mind.

Happily amongst poor Halliday's many failings as a preacher prolixity at least was not to be reckoned ; in less, therefore, than twenty minutes from the beginning of his discourse the whole party were out of church, and tramping homewards with

that quickened appetite for luncheon which it seems to be one of the useful results of devotional exercises to engender. This time Muriel successfully evaded the pony phaeton, and attached herself to Sir Anthony, with whom, ever since the affair of the picture, she had been upon the friendliest footing. They were the last of the walking party, he having been detained in the churchyard by an excited verger, eager to expatiate upon some depredation lately committed on some of the objects under his charge. Escaped at last from this zealous official, they were proceeding up the avenue, when a quick step sounded on the gravel behind them, and Halliday came up.

Muriel had hardly spoken to him since his return, and would have liked now to touch upon the subject of the sermon, but somehow lacked the courage to begin. Sir Anthony, however, was less reticent.

"You really ought to take Essant, my dear Stephen," he said, a small, rather mocking smile hovering about his thin, well-cut lips. "Such gifts as yours, my dear fellow, are wasted, positively wasted, in London."

His nephew reddened. "You mean that I'm only fit to preach to the bumpkins?" he said curtly.

"By no means; I merely mean that those maxims you were inculcating upon us just now—excellent as they undoubtedly are—have unfortunately grown a little rococo there, whereas here, you know, we flatter ourselves that they still hold their own."

This little speech annoyed Muriel; indeed, her host's cynicism had never before struck her in so little amiable a light.

"But if they have grown out of date, so much the more reason surely for in-

sisting upon them," she exclaimed warmly.
"At least so it seems to me."

At the sound of her voice, rather more elevated than usual, both men turned towards her; Halliday, with a quick glance of gratitude, Sir Anthony with the same slightly mocking smile as before, one which now seemed to include her as well as his nephew.

"Undoubtedly, my dear young lady," he replied. "The only question is will they be accepted? When people have arrived at the anchovy and devilled biscuit stage of their dinner, they are not likely, I am afraid, to go back to roast mutton again, however wholesome the latter may be."

"Particularly if the mutton is badly cooked for them," poor Halliday put in grimly.

"No, no," his uncle answered. "The mutton is excellent mutton—good, sound, and wholesome. Only if people prefer

French cooking," with a slight shrug, "what is to be done then? Better keep your plain diet for those that like it."

"I like it," Muriel said courageously.

"Thank you, Miss Ellis," Halliday answered. "All the same, I am afraid you will hardly persuade my uncle that I am a great preacher," he added, smiling rather ruefully.

"And I very much doubt whether your uncle would like you the better if you were, my friend," that gentleman replied, with less than his usual ironical emphasis. "The qualities which go to producing great preachers are sometimes of doubtful benefit, I suspect, to those preachers themselves."

"What sort of qualities, sir?"

"Well, plausibility, dexterity, all that sort of thing. Beside, a great preacher must be a great moralist, and a great moralist must have the nose of a ferret for

tracking out all sorts of ugly traits into all sorts of ugly and unpleasant recesses."

"I hope you don't imagine I should shrink from anything of that kind, sir?" his nephew exclaimed warmly.

"Very likely not; but to do it successfully a certain bias is necessary, and it is not a very serious charge against you, my friend, to say that I somewhat mis-doubt your having that necessary bias."

They had been walking rather quickly, and had now come to a turn where a narrow path, branching off the avenue, led by a more direct route to the house. This path took them under the broken light and shade of a small oak wood, rising out of an undergrowth of laurels and rhododendrons, in their turn opening to disclose a small garden, half hidden away under the trees. Here some of the others, including Hyde and Lena, were found to have lingered, tempted by the warmth

and sweetness. It was a pretty little spot, in fact, and had been the favourite garden of the former Lady Beachamp, but, despite its proximity to the house, had got rather neglected somehow under the present *régime*. Stone steps, ornamented with quaint devices—a triton with his conch, a headless dragon, a monkey stealing nuts—led from one little grass-grown level to another, and there were roses dropping their petals about the walks, and a great, heavy-blossomed magnolia against one of the walls; on the whole, though, the spot had rather a dank and dismantled appearance, the first footprints of autumn seeming more visibly imprinted there than elsewhere.

Lena called to her father to come and look at some depredations committed by the rabbits upon a bed of carnations, and accordingly he walked back a little way with her to examine a hole by

which the marauders were supposed to have entered, Halliday and Muriel being meanwhile left standing together close to where another and a wider flight of steps led from the little secluded garden to the more open and garish world above. Curiously enough, though she had now been nearly a week at Chudleigh, it was the first time that Muriel had found herself alone with him, and a sudden impulse came over her to try and break down once for all this foolish barrier which had so unaccountably grown up between them.

"Mr. Halliday," she said, turning eagerly to him, "I want to ask you a question. Will you promise me to answer it candidly?"

"Certainly," he answered, speaking, however, in rather a startled tone of voice.

"Then, please tell me what has been the matter with you all this time I have

been here? Have I done anything to offend you?"

"Nothing, indeed—nothing, I assure you," he replied hurriedly, looking vaguely round, as if for some way of escape.

"Then, why have you kept so aloof?" she persisted. "Why until to-day have you never come near me or spoken to me?—here, too, where, as you know, I am the stranger. It was not kind, I think."

Poor Halliday stood like a man at bay. He looked along the flights of moss-grown steps, and at all the ugly, little, grinning tritons and dragons, finally, he turned and looked his accuser full in the face—a long, appealing, mutely reproachful look. The reader has just seen how far from effective he was in the pulpit; it is only fair therefore to say that if his tongue there could only have achieved half or quarter what this look of his said, or seemed to Muriel to say, he might have set up then and there as

another Bossuet. It seemed to tell her all that she had known, but had refused to believe before, that she could never now refuse to believe again. It upbraided her; besought her; appealed to her. "You know; you might know; you *do* know," it seemed to say. "If you can do nothing else for me, at least leave me alone; when you see that I am struggling, why go out of your way to torment me? Have you no feeling, no pity, no remorse?" How much of all this there really was, and how much was merely invented by her own suddenly excited conscience, it was impossible for her to say. At all events, a conviction of what hitherto had been a mere surmise—a vague suspicion, a thing of no account, to be put aside and ignored—seemed to come rushing in upon her, and to overwhelm her like a flood. Before she could recover herself, or make any attempt to rally from her surprise, Lady Beachamp's

shrill voice was heard calling from the terrace above—

“Sir Anthony, Sir Anthony! Lena, Lena! What are you all doing there? Are you aware that it is past two o’clock, and that the luncheon is getting cold? Do you see anything of them, Captain Mowbray?”—this to an attendant squire—“I see nothing and nobody; nothing but those stupid little beds and flower-vases. Oh yes, I do, though; I see Miss Ellis and Mr. Halliday. Dear me”—in a lower but still perfectly audible aside—“what a flirtation they’re having, aren’t they? I didn’t think——” Whisper, whisper, whisper—and Lady Beachamp’s skirts were heard rustling back along the gravel.

The two in the hollow below stood staring at one another for an instant; then, without another word, Muriel turned and fled—up the steps, across the terrace,

never pausing or looking round till she found herself safe in her own room. Even there, however, there was not a minute to spare. She had to change her walking things and hurry down again, otherwise she would inevitably be missed from the luncheon table. All luncheon time she talked and laughed with more than usual animation, her own voice sounding in her ears like the voice of some one about a mile off. Even after luncheon she could not immediately get away, as some visitors came in, and her sketch-book had to be brought into requisition ; at last, however, she made an excuse, and escaped upstairs, where, once more safe in her own room, with the door shut and bolted behind her, she sat down face to face with this new, wonderful, and totally unforeseen event which had so suddenly sprung up in her own life.

She knew it all now—her own share of

the matter, that is, as well as his. As surely as she knew what Halliday was feeling for her, so surely she knew what she herself felt for him. Though the knowledge had only just come to her, she felt as if it was already an old affair; a thing she had known for years and years. That one silly, meaningless little exclamation of Lady Beachamp's had made the whole thing clear, had served as the proverbial spark which fires the whole stack. How long she might have gone on otherwise without suspecting it she could not, of course, now tell, but at all events the thing was done now, the fact was known, and known for ever, there could be no going back from that again. Indeed, Muriel had no desire to go back. She felt herself trembling all over in every nerve with excitement and eagerness, and a vague tremulous irrational happiness—a happi-

ness which seemed to sweep over her in great successive fluctuations like the waves of a sea. With all this, however, there every now and then mingled a dull cold thrill of apprehension. Why had he not spoken? she asked herself. Why had he looked at her so sternly, so angrily? If he really cared for her why did he keep aloof? why did he not come forward and claim her, seeing that nothing, absolutely nothing, stood between them? Of course, though she repeated to herself over and over that nothing stood between them, she could see well enough that there might be something, or what he might choose to regard as something. For one thing she had money—not much, it is true, but still some—whereas he, on the other hand, she believed, had none, or practically none. Still, surely, surely, she thought he would not let that come between them?—such a ridiculous, contemptible, worthless little

obstacle as *that*. Yes, but then, on the other hand, if he did *not* think it ridiculous, if, on the contrary, he had resolved not to open his lips because of it, what could she do? Could she, of her own unassisted effort, break down the barriers which he, however unreasonably, had set up? It was easy, of course, to resolve that nothing on *her* side, no vacillations or hesitations, or ill-timed follies of that sort, should come between them; but what of that, if he on his side refused to speak? Could she go to him and say, "Seeing, sir, by your eyes, that you love me, I wish to inform you that I will be your wife"? could she even hint at such a sentiment, however remotely, however delicately? Forbid it every feeling of dignity and womanly decorum! Well then, what remained? what resource was open to her? None, she told herself, none. She had no resource, she must wait and hope, and hope and wait. Yes, but

the time for all this waiting and hoping was limited. The moments—invaluable, irrecoverable—were flying and hurrying and rushing past them. To-morrow she herself was returning to the farm; the day after Halliday she knew was returning to London, and once parted who could say when they might meet again? not, perhaps, for years, not perhaps ever! A great wave of misery seemed to come rushing over her, as she thought of the possibility, nay more than possibility of all this. The future—the years of loneliness which a few hours before she had looked forward to, if not exactly with rapture, at all events with a very fair share of equanimity—seemed suddenly to have become dreadful—her whole life, hopes, fears, wishes, her standards for the past, her ideals for the future, everything seemed revolutionized within the last few hours. Starting up from her seat, she paced to and fro the

room, all the self-reliance and independence on which she had hitherto plumed herself swallowed up for the moment in the crushing and piercing sense of her own impotence. If she could only see him again, were it but for five minutes, then everything, she felt, must come right; then everything might be explained; perhaps, --very likely indeed—he thought her heartless and indifferent, influenced possibly by vulgar considerations and careless to anything he might be thinking and feeling; what reason, indeed, had he to think her otherwise? She looked at her watch. It was already past the hour for afternoon church. Possibly Halliday might have come back—possibly even at that very moment he might be sitting in the hall—and with this thought in her mind, she hurried downstairs. He was not, however, in the hall, nor in the library, nor in any of the other rooms, nor yet upon the terrace;

nor, though Muriel lingered to the very last, till long after every one else had gone to dress, did he return as long as she remained.

At dinner it was as bad. She saw him, indeed, but only a long way off, at the very farthest part of the long table; and afterwards in the drawing-room it seemed to her that he avoided her more than ever, devoting himself to a grizzled old gentleman—one of the local proprietors—and not apparently bestowing a glance or a thought in her direction. If this was his case, it certainly was not hers. To her own perceptions it seemed as if she was literally conscious of no other presence in the room than his, as though the others were nothing more than so many shams or simulacras walking about in the guise of humanity. She found herself perpetually analyzing, thinking of him, comparing him with others. It did not seem to her that

she was at all inclined suddenly to overrate his merits, or be blind to those deficiencies of which she had always been aware. It did not, for instance, occur to her for a moment that he was the least what could be called a clever man ; he was not as clever as his friend Hyde, for instance ; not, perhaps, as clever as his cousin Conroy, not to speak of Conroy's father. On the other hand, he had, so at least it seemed to her, a certain manly breadth of character—a massiveness—which none of the others possessed, which no other man she had ever known possessed to the same degree. She was not sure, she told herself, that it enhanced a man's manliness to be clever. Of course a transcendent genius was another thing ; but even if a man *was* a transcendent genius, he ought to have a certain saving dulness, and even stupidity about little things. There was something petty and puerile in a man being per-

petually acute and wideawake about trifles. Again, she did not flatter herself that his temper was by any means invariably angelic. Lena had talked about his obstinacy, and doubtless he was obstinate. Doubtless, too, he could be desperately angry upon occasion, indeed, she herself had more than once seen him when his temper, in nursery phrase, seemed remarkably near to the surface. Still, all deductions fairly made, it did honestly seem to her that he was emphatically better—larger, less selfish, less petty, less self-seeking than others—that he stood upon a distinctly higher platform than any other man she had yet known—certainly than any other young man. Meanwhile, the moments were again slipping away, and again there seemed to be no opportunity of speaking to him. All the evening she tried to invent opportunities; but invariably something came in the way.

Once she heard him talking to Sir Anthony near her about some cottage he had been to that afternoon, where there was a man down in typhoid fever. He was afraid the place was in a bad way, he said, and would be glad that his uncle would have it seen to. Muriel would have liked to turn and join in this conversation; but, unfortunately, the assiduous Conroy was talking to her at the time, and before she could disengage herself from him it had come to an end, and Halliday had moved away. So it went on all the evening, until at last bed-time came, and she had to go upstairs and sit down face to face with the fact that her last evening had come and gone, and that not so much as one solitary syllable had been exchanged between them.

CHAPTER VII.

ON A NORFOLK MARSH.

THE next day, the last of her stay at Chudleigh, broke bright and fine, and every one seemed in high spirits, and disposed to make the most of it. At breakfast the inevitable Conroy again sat beside her, that place having by this time become vested in him by a sort of common consent. Halliday was not there when she entered; he had gone, as she learnt by a casual remark of Lena's, to see again those typhoid-stricken people of whom she had heard him speak overnight. He came in, however, when the meal was about half over, looking, she

thought, ill or tired, and, after a momentary glance in her direction, went and sat down in a vacant place upon the opposite side. For a minute it seemed to Muriel as if she neither heard nor saw anything that was going on around her, her brain was whirling, her heart throbbing excitedly. Happily, this phase passed, and she was able to listen, with some appearance of attention, to the observations which Conroy was pouring industriously into her ear. They were going that day to a place, he told her, called "The Wobbles." No, it was not a pretty name, but, on the whole, it was the best bit of scenery thereabouts, and as such it had been kept for a *bon bouche*. It was a sort of marsh, a wonderful place in winter for wild birds, not exactly one of the true Norfolk "broads," but then, as she had never seen the latter, it was to be hoped she would

not discover the difference. The only bore was that their dear little quartet was to be broken in upon, as some of the others, it seemed, wanted to go as well. However, she must promise to come with him in his T-cart, and not listen to Lena, who would be certain to tell her that she did it at the risk of her neck, whereas there really couldn't be a grosser calumny. As a rider, he was always the first to admit his own incapacity, but he really did and could drive just as well as any man in England, and if she would trust herself to him, he would absolutely engage that she would not come to any grief. To all this Muriel agreed, as she would at that moment have agreed to anything he might have chosen to propose, her ears being all the time strained to catch what was going on upon the opposite side of the table. Would Halliday be in the

library after breakfast, and would she have an opportunity of speaking to him? she wondered. What she was going to say if she did get such an opportunity she was by no means clear, but to speak—to try, if possible, to clear up this wretched misunderstanding—seemed the one thing now most to be desired in the world. Not very long after breakfast she saw him pass the window, however, with his uncle, presumably upon a visit of inspection to the unsatisfactory cottages; nor did he reappear until just as they were all sitting down to luncheon.

This meal was a much less prolonged and stately affair to-day than usual, as the whole party were to start immediately afterwards to the place with the unmelodious name of which Conroy had spoken. Hallyday tried to escape this necessity, pleading letters, and other important avocations, but such an outcry was raised at his

recusancy, that he at last succumbed, and agreed to make one of the party who were to fill the large waggonette. When, half an hour later, Muriel came down with her hat on, she found the two carriages drawn up together at the entrance, Conroy standing ready to hand her to her own elevated seat beside himself.

The place they were bound for was some six or seven miles away from Chudleigh, and was reached by a long, straight road, crossing a dull uninteresting stretch of country, flat as a pampas or an African desert. Muriel thought she knew something of the flatness of Norfolk scenery already, but this portion she now saw was both flatter and duller than anything she had seen before. They were not able to drive to where the boats were to meet them, but had to leave the carriages at the top of a sort of raised path, or causeway, running at some

little height above the general surface of the marsh. This path was so narrow that only two could move abreast on it, and again Muriel found herself told off to walk with the indefatigable Conroy, who hurried her on some little way ahead of the rest of the party.

On arriving at the end of the causeway, a couple of flat-bottomed boats, one large, the other much smaller, were found waiting for them under the charge of a game-keeper. Conroy drew the lesser one of the two to the side of the shore, and requested her to get in. This Muriel did, expecting that they would then wait for the others. No sooner, however, had she done so, than he sprang in after her, and, seizing the long pole, began pushing his way through a narrow passage leading to the wider stream beyond.

"Oh, but please stop and let us wait for the others, Mr. Beachamp!" she

exclaimed in a tone of annoyance. "Why should we go off like this alone?"

"On the contrary, why should we wait? The boat is only warranted to hold two, I assure you."

"That is no reason why we should be the two to monopolize it."

"I think it is a very good reason," he answered, laughing. "At any rate, they won't get it from us now."

He was poling vigorously through the narrow channel as he spoke, the dead reed-stalks giving way before them with a sharp crackle, and at this moment they suddenly shot out into the wider portion, the deeper, but still hardly perceptibly moving water, sliding slowly past them in long glassy ripples.

Muriel looked back. The others, she could see, had now come up, and were bestowing themselves in the larger boat; she could hear Lady Beachamp's shrill

voice and small shrieks of fright, real or pretended. There seemed to be plenty of room certainly for everybody, so that it would be only making herself ridiculous, she felt, to offer any further remonstrance; and accordingly she lay back amongst the straw which filled one end of the boat, and let her eyes wander indolently over the wide expanse before her. Far off—a mile perhaps in reality, but looking leagues in the deceptive flatness—a belt of firs and oaks rose dark against the sky; otherwise nothing was to be seen on every side but the breadth and unvarying greenness of the marsh. Now they passed along wide channels, so shallow that the boat, flat as it was, could only be induced to move by much expenditure of time and pushing. Then through deeper and narrower ones, where the tall barriers of weeds and rushes shut them in on either side, the sky showing overhead

like a thin blue streak between the sharp pointed spikes of last year's growth ; then they would come out again to places where a whole stretch of reeds had been cut, and the wide green expanse lay level before them again. To and fro across the narrow lane big dragon-flies went hawking, their blue and brown coats glittering like armour in the sunshine, while from far overhead came from time to time the drumming of a snipe, or the wild, almost human-like cry of the seagulls passing along to the distant coast.

"Look," Conroy said, pointing to a string of wild duck flying immediately overhead. "By Jove, what a shot! Pity I never thought of bringing a gun."

Muriel looked, as she was desired, but made no audible response. She was annoyed with Conroy, and thought him extremely officious and troublesome, nor could even the curious beauty of the

scene win her at first from her irritated mood.

Little by little, however, the repose and drowsy summer sweetness which pervaded everything began to take possession of her senses, and to lull her into a sort of forgetfulness. Everything was so warm and bright and placid. The water, penetrated here and there by spots of sunshine, slid along in broad blue or brown pellucid curves, broken now and again by some ragged stump of alder, or the splintered fragments of withered reeds. Waifs and strays of grass floated leisurely past the boat, and, looking down into the clear brown depths, she could see where worlds upon worlds of delicate water weeds were swaying to and fro near the bottom. The water-lilies, of course, were over now, so, too, were the marigolds and the bog-beans, but the loosestrifes and crimson willowherbs were just attaining their full

splendour, and the scent of the mint and water-sage reached them in puffs as they brushed along the leaf-strewn banks.

Conroy, who at first had enough to do to propel the boat, began after a while to tire of this persistently silent progression, and to desire a change. "You are in a brown study, Miss Ellis," he said, leaning a little forward so as to try and induce her to turn and look at him.

"Am I? perhaps I am. It is very pretty and curious—not at all like English scenery, I think. I like looking at it much better than talking."

Mr. Beachamp indulged in a private grimace at this very unmistakable intimation. His little plot was not turning out quite such a brilliant success as he could have wished. It was all very well to secure an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête* with Miss Ellis, but what if he could not induce her to speak, or even to look at

him? Certainly he had in that case the satisfaction of observing her profile, defined as it was against the pale greys and blues beyond, but then, unfortunately, Conroy was not sufficiently in love to be satisfied with so very ethereal a form of enjoyment as that, and he began, on the whole, to think that a change of front would probably be desirable. If he could only get her ashore, and out of this wretched boat—which, by the way, was a good deal harder to pole than he could have imagined—possibly she might become friendly and communicable again.

Gradually slackening his efforts, he waited, therefore, so as to allow the others to come within speaking distance. Then, disregarding the shower of objurgations which was immediately rained upon him from all sides, he addressed himself exclusively to Lady McClusky.

“Lady McClusky, you have seen every-

thing. Have you ever seen an otter wallow?"

"No, Mr. Beachamp, I can't call to mind that I ever have," that travelled lady replied conscientiously. "I've seen elephant wallows, though—in Ceylon that was. Would it be something like them?"

"I should say very much like them, indeed," Conroy answered gravely. "Some naturalists are of opinion that they resort to them for the purpose of removing certain parasites which adhere to their skin; but that I have always myself held to be a calumny. In any case, there is one close at hand, if you would like to see it."

Every one, including even Lady Beachamp, expressed an immediate willingness to go in quest of this phenomenon, the only exception being Muriel, who while the discussion was going on, had quietly taken out her sketch book and was be-

ginning to make a sketch of the opposite bank.

"But aren't you coming to see my wallow?" Conroy exclaimed, in a tone of dismay.

"Thank you, Mr. Beachamp, I think, if you don't mind, I would rather stay where I am and sketch," she replied.

"Oh, if you *prefer* it!" in a tone of considerable pique.

"Yes, I think I do prefer it."

"Very well, then; stay, of course. Unfortunately, *I* must go, as I've brought these people upon myself."

"Certainly; I shouldn't dream of detaining you upon my account," she replied demurely.

Mr. Beachamp turned away in a fume.

"Mind the boat don't get loose, that's all!" he cried, as he walked away.

As long as the noise and commotion around her was going on Muriel plied her

pencil diligently, but when at last the others had all landed, and she and the boats were left alone upon the stream, she let her hands drop idly down at her side, and gave herself up to the dismalest of all dismal reflections.

In refusing to make one of the exploring party she had secretly cherished a hope that Halliday, too, might perhaps have lingered. When, therefore, she saw him after helping the others ashore, gravely stalk off in the rear of the party, without even casting a glance behind him, a feeling of something very nearly akin to despair seemed to settle down upon her soul. What mattered anything she thought? What mattered what became of her if this was to be the end of all?

It almost seemed as if the last sentiment was likely to be put to a practical test, for the boat, which in truth had been only very slightly grounded by Conroy, suddenly dislodged itself from the bank, and began

slowly slipping down the current, at this point rendered more rapid by a couple of contributions which had lately joined it. The situation, it must be owned, was more ridiculous than tragic; indeed, despite the serious nature of her late reflections, Muriel herself at first could hardly help laughing, so supremely absurd did the whole dilemma appear to her. The current, however, began to get quicker and quicker, and the boat to bump vigorously about against the stones which thickly encumbered the bottom. She had no oars, and nothing to guide herself with, the pole having been flung ashore by Conroy when he departed, so that she was beginning to think that it would possibly be wisest to make up her mind to get overboard, before the water became any deeper than it was at present. Suddenly, however, while she was debating the point, a crackling of twigs was heard a little to

the left of where the party had lately disappeared, and Halliday's head and shoulders were seen above the nearest clump of reeds.

In an instant he had perceived her dilemma.

"Stay still; don't attempt to stir," he exclaimed.

He was in the stream and wading towards her before he had finished speaking. Another minute and a strong hand was laid on the boat, and it was being quietly guided towards the bank.

Muriel sat still as she was desired, without even going through the form of thanking him for his timely aid. It did not appear, however, as if he had observed the omission. He was engaged in carefully securing the boat by means of a rope passed round a stump which happened to be sticking out of the bank. This done, he seemed about to turn away again without another word.

This was too much for Muriel's self-control.

"You are not going? You will not leave me?" she cried.

He turned with an air of surprise. "Leave you?" he said. "You are perfectly safe. The boat cannot possibly come unfastened again."

"I was not thinking of the boat. Of course I am safe; I don't suppose I should have been drowned even if you had not come up. Should I?"

"Certainly not; you could not have been drowned. You might have got rather wet, that is about the very worst that could have happened to you."

"Then why suppose when I ask you to stay that I mean on account of the boat?"

Halliday stood still, staring gravely at her for a minute. "Simply because that is the only reason I can suppose for

your wishing me to stay," he said at last.

Something in the tone in which this was said, more even than the words themselves, seemed to put Muriel beside herself; to inspire her with a vehement desire then and there to convince him to the contrary; to break down—as it were by force—this preposterous unnatural barrier which he had chosen to set up between them. "You might think of another, I think," she exclaimed impetuously.

Halliday started, and a great flush—of anger, not pleasure—swept for an instant across his face. "Why do you say that? Why do you say such things to me?" he cried vehemently. Then, with an evident effort at self-control, "You are too good and kind, Miss Ellis, to wish to give pain unnecessarily—you would not do so, I am sure—but you do not, indeed you cannot, realize the harm you do when you say

such a thing as that; when you tempt a man to—to—in short, to do what he has resolved not to do,” he ended lamely.

To this somewhat halting rhetoric Muriel attempted no rejoinder. She was startled, indeed, by the echo of her own headlong words, which seemed to her to have escaped from her almost without volition of her own.

“Perhaps,” Halliday went on after a minute’s pause, “perhaps, as I have gone so far, I had better go on and make an end of it, so that if we ever meet again—which I must only hope for my own sake we never may—there will be no occasion to recur to it.” He hesitated, but Muriel still sat silent, her eyes fixed expectantly upon his face. “It doesn’t need much telling, I should think,” he then said curtly. “It’s plain enough, I should fancy—rather too plain for me. It simply is that I love you—nothing more.

I've a right to love you, as far as that goes, I suppose, if I choose; at any rate I do, whether I have or haven't. It's gone on ever since that second time we met in the forest, and how long it is going on Heavens only knows. I have been no better than a log all this summer, an encumbrance to myself and to every one else. As to my work—well, the less said about that the better. Perhaps, now that I've told you things will begin to mend," he added, with rather a dreary smile, "if so you won't grudge me the telling, I am sure; at all events it will answer the question you asked me yesterday; it will explain anything that seems odd in my manner. It will show you, too, that it is better—much better—that we should not meet again." He put down the boat rope, which he had all this time held in his hand, and was about to move determinately away.

"Why is it better?" she exclaimed,

catching at the last words in her terror of seeing him go.

He stopped and stood looking at her with a puzzled expression, which gradually gave place to a frown.

"What do you mean?" he said sharply.

"You say that you love me, and then you say that we had better part, and I simply ask you why?" she repeated.

A variety of expressions—puzzled, joyous, angry, bewildered, sceptical—passed in succession over the young man's face. "You are not trying to persuade me that you care for me, are you?" he cried at last contemptuously.

"I don't know whether I am trying or not, but it is so," she answered simply.

"You care for *me*?"

"I care for you. Yes."

"Muriel!—Nonsense, though; you are only joking. It is impossible!" he said, checking himself abruptly.

"Why impossible?"

"Because—because of everything. Because I am so different. Because I am rough, Gothish, uncouth, unmannerly; you have said as much, or implied as much yourself."

"Possibly I like Goths," she replied, smiling.

"In fact, there is every reason against it," he went on unheedingly, "and nothing that I can see in its favour. I am nothing and nobody—literally nobody. Why should you care for me? What could there be in me to attract a woman like you?"

She was smiling still, but her smile became graver as she listened. "Because I think—I may be mistaken—but, on the whole, I think you are better than most people," she said slowly. "That, if you wish to know, is one reason, and I think a very good one. There may be others as well."

“Oh, but you have got hold of quite a wrong notion there ; you have, indeed,” he exclaimed eagerly. “You mustn’t go off upon that. You fancy it because I am always fussing about after poor people, and drains, and so forth ; but you must remember that all that is simply part of my trade—what I am paid for, just as much as a blacksmith is paid to shoe horses, or a surgeon to cut off people’s arms and legs. There is no question of goodness in the matter.”

“Nevertheless I hold to my opinion,” she said, smiling. “One has a right to one’s own opinion, hasn’t one, even if it happen to be a wrong one ? ”

“This *is* a very wrong one.”

“Very well, be it so. Let me enjoy my delusion and be happy then. There is one thing, though, by the way,” she added with sudden seriousness, “which does seem to me wrong in you—really wrong.

Why have you quarrelled with your father?"

"You are right," he answered, "and the worst is, that I haven't any excuse either—not a scrap. It simply was that I took it into my head not to like the sort of life he wanted me to lead, and so went off on my own account instead; and the result has proved that he was perfectly right, for I have made the most hideous mess of what I took up. No man, I should think, has ever made so many monstrous blunders in the same space of time."

She shook her head, half reprovingly, half sceptically. "Let us hope your evidence may not be entirely trustworthy," she said. "Not but what a man may make blunders, and be a hero all the same," she added.

"But I am not at all a hero."

"I did not say you were. About your

father, at all events, you clearly are in the wrong," she went on. "Why do you not write and tell him so?"

"I have written. I wrote the first day I came here—the day I saw you at the station; but that is nearly a fortnight ago now, and I have not received a line since."

Muriel's face became extremely grave.

"Do you think he will never forgive you?" she inquired anxiously.

"I don't know. I can't guess. He is not a man that forgives easily. Besides," he added hesitatingly, "he is rich, you know—very rich; and very likely he thinks I did it because I wanted money—because I had got through all my own—and that naturally might prevent his writing."

"Oh, but he can't think that if he knows you," Muriel cried indignantly. "In any case, you must write again, and tell him that it is not so—nothing of the kind."

Tell him that you do not want his money, that you would not take it even if it was offered to you. I have plenty—really plenty—quite as much, at any rate, as we shall ever want to spend. You must write and tell him so at once—this very evening. Will you? Promise me that you will do so.”

“I must tell it to myself first then,” he cried, “for I have not begun to take it in or believe in it a bit as yet, I assure you!”

They had long ago utterly forgotten the very existence of the rest of the party. Now, however, sounds of approaching voices and footsteps began to be heard from different directions at once, and Conroy's face was suddenly seen through a break in the barrier of reeds which screened off this part of the marsh from the rest.

Halliday reddened. “I have been telling myself the last few days that you were

beginning to care for him," he said hurriedly.

"For *him* ! For your cousin !"

The tone was refutation enough, fortunately, for there was no time for anything more. In another moment the whole party were on top of them, all the others open-mouthed with indignation against Conroy. He had led them astray ; he had taken them a wild goose chase ; he had behaved abominably. Poor little Lady Beachamp was nearly crying.

"I shall complain to your father the very instant I get back, sir, that I shall !" she exclaimed, apostrophizing the unabashed culprit, who came sauntering up with his hands in his pockets. "I never was so treated in my life—never. One of my feet is soaked through and through, and the other one is inches deep in mud, for I hadn't anybody to help me over those horrible little ditches. I shall have to

throw my shoes away the very minute I get home ; not that I should mind even that so much, only that I feel sure I shall get such a horrible cold, and nobody has such bad colds as I have. The last one I had went on for weeks and weeks, and this one I feel will be longer still."

"But, my dear lady, you insisted upon coming yourself," remonstrated her stepson.

"Don't call me your dear lady, you very impertinent man," she exclaimed angrily. "If you have no respect for me, at least try and show some proper respect for your father."

"I have every possible respect for my father," Conroy declared mildly. "But I certainly never told my father's wife that a Norfolk marsh was a dry place to walk upon."

"Oh, very well, sir, very well ; we will soon see what he says," she cried, her small

person shaking with cold and anger, and her pretty little babyish face puckered up into an expression of literally infantine rage and discomfort.

“Give me your feet, and I will dry them for you, Maria,” said Lena, who, with Hyde, had come up a little after the others. “There, roll yourself up in this rug, and you will soon get warm.”

Muriel had all this time kept silence, rather pleased that the commotion should so effectually have diverted every one’s attention from herself and Halliday. Now, however, despite her own preoccupations, she could not help being struck by the sudden change of tone with which Lena addressed her small step-mother, whose fears and fancies she generally treated with the most sovereign contempt. What could be the meaning of such an unexpected revolution? she wondered.

A fresh arrangement was now made of

the party; Muriel herself returning in the big boat; Hyde, Conroy, and Lena taking possession of the lesser one. On arriving at the landing place, however, Conroy came up to her and proposed that she should resume her place beside him, a suggestion to which she at once acceded, and they set off accordingly, some little way in advance of the more heavily laden waggonette.

The drive was not a particularly lively one, Muriel being naturally too absorbed in her own affairs to make a very entertaining companion, while Conroy, despite the nonchalance with which he had treated his step-mother's reproaches, was secretly not a little chagrined at the poor success of his afternoon's entertainment. He was a good deal piqued, too, at the want of fervour with which Muriel herself had met his own really very flattering advances. Whether

he had or had not actually made up his mind to propose to her that afternoon—and he was not altogether clear upon that point himself—a little greater show of eagerness on her part would, he felt, have been only proper and becoming under the circumstances.

They had no groom with them, so got down in the stable-yard, and walked up the terraces to the house. On entering the hall the first thing Muriel saw were two missives, a note for herself, and a telegram for Halliday, lying together on the central table. The former—a dirty, twisted, almost indecipherable little scrawl—she at once took up and tore open. It ran as follows :

“ D^R MISS,

“ This is to tell you that old Maister flack has been tok bad in a fit, & the d^r thinks as he won't hardly git

through the nite. Jabez has gone for Maister Thumas, & so hopin' soon to see you,

“I am y^r loving servant,

“TABITHA STRONG.”

“Oh, I must go; I must go at once,” she cried. “My grandfather is very ill; they do not think that he will live. Oh, I ought not to have stayed away so long, it was very very wrong and selfish of me. Perhaps even now I shall not find him alive.”

“Must you go?” Conroy exclaimed. “Then, if so, I will ring and order the carriage to be got ready for you, and I will tell them at the same time to bring you up some tea at once, so that you will not have to wait for the others.”

“Thank you very much, but please, please don't mind about the tea,” she implored. “Only if I might get away im-

mediately ; I will not wait to pack ; my things can be sent after me."


"Very well, you shall have the carriage at once, then," he answered, and ran off good-naturedly to see about it himself. As he did so, he could not help feeling, however, that it was as well—just as well perhaps—that those decisive words had *not* been said that afternoon. She was a charming creature, very charming, and he himself really was uncommonly in love with her. Still, early marriages, on the other hand, were the very deuce, and then again those relations—Conceive his being related to the Flacks! The old man might be going to die, but there would be plenty more of the name left whom it would be simple purgatory to him to be connected with. No, all things considered, he could not help feeling that a certain watchful Providence—one which had always shown itself particularly

zealous over the interests of Conroy Bea-
champ—must have been more than usually
upon the alert this afternoon, since, if
things had only been a little different—if
the punt, for instance, had been a little
less heavy, or the afternoon a little less
oppressive, or Miss Ellis herself a little
more communicative—there really was no
knowing to what headlong piece of folly
he might not by this time have found
himself committed !

CHAPTER VIII.

BOLDRE FARM UNDER A NEW ASPECT.

MURIEL naturally expected on arriving at the farm to find the house wrapped in all the subdued awe and silent expectancy which befits a spot over which the shadow of death is supposed to be visibly brooding. Her surprise, therefore, was considerable on opening the front door to see bright lights streaming, and to hear a clamour of loud and evidently excited voices proceeding from the outer kitchen. Entering that room she found a group, consisting of her uncle and aunt and a small, meagre-looking man—a cousin, she knew, of the latter—seated round the big table, which was



littered over with papers and documents of various kinds. All three had been talking so vehemently that the noise of the wheels had been unheard, and nothing was known of her arrival until she actually entered the room, when a silence, the more striking from the clamour which had just preceded it, suddenly fell upon the assembled group. Every one turned and stared at her, but no one got up or attempted to go through any form of welcome ; indeed, her uncle, who happened to be nearest to the door, after glancing a moment in her direction, suddenly turned away, and began shuffling vigorously about amongst the papers, evidently to carry off some awkwardness or nervous embarrassment.

Muriel stood still, staring at them in her turn. During the drive her thoughts had dwelt incessantly upon what she was coming to. She had been preparing herself for

much that would be sad, much too that might be painful, and even terrible. What, however, she really did find was so extremely unlike anything for which she had prepared herself, that she felt at first utterly dazed and bewildered: The bright lights, the loud voices, the sudden hush which her own entrance had produced, and now these angry looks, this incivility—especially on the part of her uncle, who had always shown himself so particularly kind and friendly towards her—all filled her with a vague sense of unreality, as if she was walking about in the midst of some highly disturbed dream.

“How is my grandfather? Has there been any change in him?” she inquired, advancing with some hesitation towards the table.

Mrs. Flack started up.

“*Your* grandfather, indeed! Ain’t he just as much *my* children’s grandfather, I

should like to know, though they mayn't have had lords for their brothers?" she almost screamed, suddenly confronting her niece.

Muriel fell back, feeling more confused than ever. Coming straight in from the silence and balmy autumnal twilight, this sudden onset, these looks of violent scorn and fury, made her feel almost sick. Where was her grandfather? she wondered. Could he be already dead? What could be the meaning of it all?

"I never said that they were not, aunt," she replied in a tone of bewilderment. "Are you displeased with me for having gone away? If so, you can't regret it more than I do myself. I meant to have returned days ago, but my grandfather himself refused to hear of my doing so; and when I rode over here on Saturday, he seemed to be much the same as usual."

"Oh, your ridings, and coachings, and

barouches, and baronets, and all—I'm sick of such work!" Mrs. Flack exclaimed furiously. "Why can't you stick to them altogether, if you're so fond of them, and leave us and our property alone, I should like to know?"

"Come, come, hang it all, Sarah, hold your tongue; what's the sense of going on like that?" her husband said gruffly. "It's an uncommonly serious business all the same, though, Muriel," he continued, turning round to his niece; "and, I must say, the last thing I should ever have expected was that you of all people would go lending yourself to this sort of dirty, underhand work!"

"Lending myself to what underhand work? I don't in the least know what you are talking about, uncle," she said, putting up her hand to her head.

"Oh, I dare say! A likely story!" ejaculated Mrs. Flack.

Mr. Flack went on without heeding either interruptions.

"If it had been the house alone, I shouldn't have said so much about it," he continued. "Though, considering the length of time it's been in the family, many a man would make a fine to-do about its going away. However, as I say, I don't go in for that sort of thing; sentiment ain't in my line. But as to the farm, that's a totally different story, and, damn it all I say, it's utterly out of all reason, and so any business man in the kingdom would tell you, I don't care who he is."

A light began to dawn upon Muriel.

"Do you mean to say that my grandfather has been leaving the farm to me?" she exclaimed in a tone of dismay.

"Oh, it's the first you've heard of it, I'll be bound," Mrs. Flack observed ironically.

Muriel made a sudden gesture of anger;

then as suddenly restrained herself. The situation, as her uncle said, was certainly a serious one; too serious to be imperilled by any ill-timed display of indignation.

“Will you kindly tell me exactly what *has* taken place, uncle?” she said, sitting down in one of the big armchairs, and addressing herself exclusively to him. “I will not say again that I know nothing about it, as my aunt does not apparently choose to believe me, but if you will be so good as to tell me everything you know, it will certainly simplify matters.”

“Simplify! Dang me, if I can see anything much simpler!” he retorted sullenly. “It’s simply, as you call it, that my father has left you the house and the interest of the farm, and every mortal stiver he possesses in the world; that’s all.”

“And me and my children nothing!” exclaimed his wife.

Muriel sat aghast. “How do you

know? Is there a will, and has it been read?" she at last inquired.

"No, of course the will has not been read. We know it from Nat Barber here." (Mr. Nathaniel Barber got up and bowed). "He's clerk in the firm of Stumps, Golightly & Co.," Thomas Flack continued. "'Twas there my father went last week, on the sly, mind you—and got his will drawn out, and signed, and all; Nat was called in as a witness."

"The house is left to the lady absolutely, her, her heirs, and assignees, to have and to hold for ever. The farm is upon a different basis, and is vested in the hands of trustees. If the lady marries within a year, and her husband is willing to undertake it, it goes to her and to him. If not, the lease is disposed of, and the proceeds invested for her sole and exclusive behalf. That, my dear sir, is the exact wording of the will," Mr. Nathaniel

Barber recited glibly, waving his hand, and nodding his head complacently from side to side.


"And a very nice hearing, too, for a man with a large family," Thomas Flack said grimly.

"And now he's got this stroke and may die at any minute, and nothing more to be done," Mrs. Flack exclaimed, with a burst of angry sobbing.

Muriel sat still for a few minutes without speaking.

"What should you have done, if it had been left as you expected, uncle?" she asked. "Should you have come and lived here?"

He looked at her suspiciously. "What's that got to say to it?" he said angrily. "Live here? No, I shouldn't have lived here. The house I'm in is a deal a better one than this. I should have let it, or may be sold it. These sort of tumble-



down old places fetch a goodish figure nowadays. As to the land, I'd have stocked some, and let the rest. There was a gentleman over near Norwich would have given me my own price for it any day I liked. But all that's nothing to the purpose now," he added disgustedly, "so what's the sense of talking?"

"It is everything to the purpose," Muriel exclaimed, starting from her seat. "As you say, it's too late to do anything about my grandfather; in any case, even if he should get better, I would rather not trouble him about it. But if you will kindly calculate exactly what you would have expected to get for the farm and the house, this gentleman, I've no doubt, will be able to draw up a properly legal form by which I can make over the amount to you at once. I know that there is a large sum of money of mine in the funds, and I am of age, and there is no one to

interfere with me, so that there ought not to be any sort of difficulty about the matter."

The other three sat staring at her open-mouthed for several minutes after she had finished speaking.

Mr. Nathaniel Barber was the first to speak.

"All I can say, Mr. Flack, is, that the lady couldn't have spoken handsomer ; she couldn't indeed," he exclaimed emphatically.

"Did I say she could, sir ?" Thomas Flack retorted sullenly. Then he got upon his feet, and stood staring fixedly at Muriel. "You didn't know naught about it then, after all, I suppose ; eh, Muriel ?" he said at last.

"No, I knew nothing about it certainly," she answered coldly ; "and now, I think, if you'll excuse me, I will go upstairs to my grandfather. I shall be quite ready to sign the papers whenever they are ready,"

she added, glancing slightly in Mr. Barber's direction. She paused again, with her hand on the door-handle, but no one said anything further, so after a minute she turned it, and went out, and up the dark stairs leading to her grandfather's room.

It seemed like passing into another world. The old house was so roomy, and its walls so thick, that the downstairs sounds were almost entirely muffled by the time she reached the upper corridor. The room the old man slept in was next to the one she herself generally occupied, and, like it, fitted up with black corner presses, and heavy beams crossing the ceiling. Instead of the small bed with the sloping top, however, the bed here was a huge, old-fashioned poster, the curtains of which had either been taken down or had fallen away from age, leaving the two long, bare poles sticking idly out on either side. Muriel passed round

the foot of the bed, and then stood still, her heart throbbing with a painful intensity.

There was nothing at all terrible, however—none of that distortion and disfiguration for which she had been secretly preparing herself. The old man's face was, indeed, wonderfully little changed, and the beauty, which all the Flacks possessed, was there in large measure, more so perhaps than when he was in health. What struck Muriel most was its extraordinary rigidity and immovability, making it seem more like a face carved in stone than like that of a living man ; indeed, but for the heavy breathing and an occasional twitching movement of the eyelids, it would have been almost impossible to say that life still lingered. Old Tabitha Strong, who had been sitting beside the bed, and whom on her first entrance she had hardly noticed, now came

forward, and from her Muriel for the first time heard of the cause which had led to her grandfather's seizure. He had been watching the men stacking the corn in the haggard, and had flown into a violent rage with one of the carters, who had failed to do it to his liking. All at once he had fallen, and when they lifted him up, he was rigid, and had remained so ever since. The doctor had come almost immediately, Tabitha said, but had shaken his head, and told them that there was nothing to be done. He was to be back, however, at eight o'clock, so that she would see him then for herself. Having listened to the old woman's story, Muriel let her go downstairs to see after some matters which were being neglected in her absence, charging her, at the same time, to find out whether her uncle and aunt were remaining for the night or returning to their own house. Not many minutes after, however,

she heard the sound of wheels coming round from the back yard, so knew, without being told, that they must be leaving. It was just as well, she felt, that they were. After what had taken place what possible satisfaction or comfort could there be to any of them in their remaining?

Presently the sound of a man's footstep was heard coming along the passage, and Thomas Flack put in his head at the door.

"We're going, Muriel," he said.

She made an instinctive sign of silence—a needless precaution, as she felt the next minute—and then came out to the doorway and stood waiting to hear what he had to say.

"I didn't like going without seeing you again," he said, with an awkward attempt at getting back to their former friendly footing.

"Thank you, uncle. Will you ask my

aunt, please, to excuse me, as I do not wish to leave my grandfather again," Muriel answered rather coldly.

"To be sure, to be sure!" Then, after a moment's pause, "You mustn't think the worse of her for what she said, Muriel. Her temper was always a bit short, you know; and for a woman with a family it was an uncommonly disagreeable hearing, that you must admit."

"I am quite ready to admit that, uncle," she answered. "Still I think she and you also might have waited to hear what I had to say before condemning me unheard," she added.

"Well, may be so indeed, Muriel, may be so. It's as well, perhaps, we're not staying on just now," he went on, with increasing awkwardness; "but you'll be sure and send over for me if there's any change. I've left a man and horse on purpose."

There seemed nothing further to say, but still he lingered. "I shouldn't wonder if your friends say I oughtn't to take you at your word about this business, Muriel," he said doubtfully.

"My friends are not at all likely to trouble themselves about it," she answered coldly. "And if they did even it would make no difference. I look upon it simply as a matter of justice."

"Yes, that's it, that's it. It's simple justice, as you say, and nothing else, ain't it?" he said eagerly. "After all, a man's eldest son is his eldest son. There ain't no way of getting over that now, is there?"

"None, I should say," she answered.

After this she again hoped he would go, but he still stood irresolutely in the doorway, his face exhibiting all the discomfort of a man who feels that his interests and his self-respect have somehow or other got into awkward juxtaposition. "'Twas

an uncommon shabby will of him to make, however you take it," he said at last resentfully.

"Please don't say that, uncle; please don't let us discuss it now, and here of all places," Muriel said in a tone of distress. "If we can remedy what is wrong in it that surely is enough, without blaming my grandfather while he is in this state."

She left the doorway, and went back to the bedside, hoping that this might be the signal for the other's departure, but he followed, and stood beside her looking down at the prostrate figure before them.

Muriel was wondering whether any new feeling of pity or tenderness was stirring within him, but the real tenor of his thoughts was evident from the next remark.

"I'll have the land valued, Muriel, every acre of it, and the house too," he said in a hoarse whisper, "so that no one can

think I overcharged you, or took advantage of your being a woman, and not knowledgeable in such matters."

"Just as you please about that, uncle," she replied.

After this he did at last take his leave, and a few minutes after the wheels were heard rolling away down the road.

The next event was the doctor's visit. He was a kindly old man, whom Muriel had known all her life, and who had always a cheerful word for every one. There was nothing cheerful, however, to be said now. It might go on for another twenty-four hours, he said, or it might end that night, there was no telling; in any case it couldn't be more than a matter of days. Was there any chance of his recovering consciousness? she inquired; but to this, too, the doctor shook his head. A chance? Well, yes, there was always a chance in these cases, but he didn't think it was

likely ; no, he was bound to tell her that the probabilities in his opinion were all against it. Anyhow, she might depend upon his being back with her as early as he could in the morning. Then he, too, went his way, and his wheels were heard rolling down the sandy road.

After this a great silence fell upon the old house. Muriel sent Tabitha to bed, promising to call her at four o'clock, or sooner if she herself grew tired, or wanted help ; then she took up her own place for the night in the big leather arm-chair drawn close to the head of the bed. For some little while afterwards there were still sounds of movement about the lower part of the house ; the opening and shutting of doors, old Jabez' creaking footsteps as he moved backwards and forwards from the stable to the kitchen ; then one by one all sounds died out ; every light was extinguished except the one shaded candle in

the sick-room, and Muriel was left to her solitary vigil.

She was glad at first of the silence and loneliness. It seemed to her as if she required a long long spell of solitude after all these different and distractingly conflicting scenes through which she had been passing lately. Could it really be only yesterday, nay only this very morning, that her mind had been so distracted with those personal fears and apprehensions, which now seemed so foolish and so uncalled for? Could it be only a few hours ago that she was sitting in the boat upon the marsh? since she was talking to Halliday and listening to his declaration of love? That ugly discordant scene which had heralded her arrival at the farm seemed to her to lie like a rift between the present and all the quiet peaceful time which had preceded it. The violence, the angry looks, the jealousy, the mean suspicions, rankled within her


—it seemed to her like something from which she could never wholly clear herself—a stain which would leave its traces, however hard she might struggle to get rid of them. She could not even, though she tried, feel any particular gratitude to her grandfather for his good intentions on her behalf. If the will he had made was so manifestly unjust, it did not certainly make it less so that the injustice was to have operated in her own favour. She was shrewd enough, too, to see that affection for herself was probably the least of the causes at work in the matter. It was not because she wanted it, but because, in fact, she did *not* want it—because she was already independent—that it gratified the old man's pride to make her his heiress. Not love for her, but dislike of the Thomas Flacks, was really the determining cause, she knew, in the whole matter. Little by little, however, as the

night wore on, every other thought and feeling became merged in one—in the consciousness of that presence lying there beside her—that life ebbing away, so silently, so inevitably, as it were drop by drop, minute by minute. If there had been anything she could have done; any way, however trifling, by which she could have ministered to his comfort, she would not, she thought, have felt it so much. But merely to sit and sit, and wait and wait, and *know* that there could be only one end! When she had undertaken the watch, Muriel had not realized how terrible this would be, how intense the loneliness, how desperate the longing to have some one, no matter who, to share it. She felt loath to break in upon poor old Tabitha's well-earned slumbers, and yet this sense of isolation was momentarily becoming more than she could bear. A growing horror, too, began to take possession of her; not

a supernatural horror, but rather a grimly natural, and material one, against which she struggled in vain. How desperately, appallingly silent everything was too—that “tingling silentness” of midnight, which is so different and so infinitely deeper than the very deepest stillness of noon. No, come what might she could not, she felt, bear her present position one single instant longer; so, springing up from her chair, she hurried across the room, and, hastily drawing back the curtains, flung open the casement.


It was a glorious night. The moon, just at the full, was pouring over the shining levels of the mere, which seemed stretching immeasurably away from her in the dimness. The reeds and rushes in the foreground appeared as if crusted over with silver; the dumpy shingled roof of Essant church stood out big against the placid unfathomable darkness.

of the sky. The moonlight and the simple prosaic pathos of everything seemed to confront Muriel almost like a personality—a new presence suddenly sprung up besides herself and that other silent one upon the bed. The words “a night to die on,” which, she had somewhere seen or heard, came back like an echo across her mind. “A night to die on, indeed,” she repeated to herself, as she stood looking up into the great blue-grey vault, thick-sown with innumerable points—pin-pricks or worlds according as one may choose to regard them. The scene and thought were both solemn enough, and yet, try to keep it out of her mind as she would, there was something incongruous, nay, something almost humorously impossible, in the notion of her grandfather—of old John Flack, whose thoughts so lately lingered amongst his cows and his sheep, his turnips and his mangel-wurzels—passing up that great



silvery slope, becoming involved in that mystery — transcendent, immemorial — which attaches to those who have gone out before us into the unknown. Do what she would, she could not take the idea in : it seemed incredible, impossible, a thing not to be conceived. Like all highly strung natures, Muriel had naturally a strong leaning and hankering towards the unseen ; indeed, there were moments when what we call the real and the unreal, the visible and the invisible, seemed to meet and overlap one another in her mind. Tonight, however, despite the solemnity of the occasion, despite the delicate shielding moonlight, despite even the almost magical beauty of the scene, nothing seemed able to take off the hard cold sense of the actual. She could not pray ; she could not distract her mind by thinking of anything else. Beside the grim reality of this death-bed—this

gaunt figure lying there in its loneliness—everything else, joys, sorrows, loves, hatreds, seemed to become merged and dwarfed, to be not only insignificant but shadowy. It was not even like a drama, a struggle. No, there was no drama, no struggle; it almost seemed to her that it would have been less terrible if there had been one. This horrible waiting, waiting, appeared to press upon her almost as though she herself had been a sharer, and not a mere spectator of the issue. She had been beside other death-beds, but none that affected her like this; none that seemed so terrible, so dreary, so unutterably sad and tragic in its loneliness. Poor old man, poor grandfather! Was no one sorry for him? no one sorrier, that is, than she was herself? How cruel it all seemed! what a sad, sad ending to a life! she thought, leaning her head upon her hands, and looking silently out over the moonstruck waters.



Slowly the long hours wore themselves away. Once Muriel dozed uneasily for a few minutes in her chair, and awoke with a sudden start, feeling as if something terrible had happened near her. Nothing, however, had happened. Everything was unchanged. The old man still lay in the same curious, dreamlike trance ; one hand extended upon the counterpane, his face set in the same grey inviolable calm. She heard the church clock strike the hours one after the other. The moon sank and sank until it had all but disappeared ; the cold, dark hours that precedes the dawn had come, and a shiver seemed to sweep over the earth. Muriel, however, was not cold ; on the contrary, she felt feverish and choked with want of air. Looking at her watch, she found that it was now nearly four o'clock. Calling, therefore, to Tabitha, who was sleeping close at hand, to come and take her place, she crept

down the dark stairs and out by the front door. Old John had always insisted upon keeping that door barred and bolted, but in the commotion which had attended his illness no one had taken the trouble to do so, so that it opened with a touch. The rush of cold night air came pleasantly against Muriel's face as she stepped over the threshold; the placid darkness seemed, in the ancient phrase, to encompass her as with a garment. She walked on a few steps, and stood still beside the gate looking out into the dimness. Tiny sounds, which would have been wholly imperceptible in the daytime, came distinctly to her ear. The soft *sussurro* of the wind amongst the alder leaves; the slow, irregular lapping of the water against the stones; a farm horse moving uneasily in its narrow stall; the faint, far-off yelping of a dog. Other sounds, too, fainter and more indis-

tinguishable than these, vague stirrings and rustlings, which seemed as it were to come from the very ground. Presently another and distincter sound reached her ear, a tread of footsteps coming down from the road above, the quick, regular footsteps of a man ; another minute, and a form became dimly visible in the early morning twilight. Apparently the visitor, whoever he was, had no intention of coming to the house, for he turned away from the entrance, and circled round to where a thin stream of light fell from the sick-room window. Muriel's heart beat quickly. She thought she knew the step, yet hesitated to speak. Presently the figure approached her again, and this time she fancied she could distinguish the face.

"Is not that Mr. Halliday?" she said hesitatingly.

He stopped and uttered a loud ejacula-

tion. "Muriel? Miss Ellis? You here?
At this hour?"

"Yes, I came out for a moment. I
have been sitting up with my grand-
father."

"How is he?"

"Much the same. Will you come up
and see him?"

"Would he like it?" Halliday said
doubtfully.

"He will not know—at least, I think
not."

She turned, and he followed her into
the house and up the ghostly stairs into
the sick man's room. There had been
no change since she left; the old man
still lay in the same deathlike trance;
old Tabitha sitting there, bolt upright, be-
side the bed; her shadow—more grotesque
even than the reality—flung in black dis-
tinctness against the ceiling. After re-
maining in the room for a few minutes,

they turned and re-descended the stairs, and out of the house. A few faint lights were beginning by this time to show in the eastern sky; birds, too, were awakening in the hedges; as they again paused beside the gate the church clock began striking the half-hour.

"Of course I never dreamt of intruding upon you at this hour," Halliday said abruptly. "I meant to send you a note in the morning to tell you that I, too, have had a summons. My father is ill."

"Oh!" Muriel exclaimed, clasping her hands, "then that accounts——"

"Yes, that accounts, I suppose, for my not having heard."

"Of course it does; how can you doubt it? Is he very seriously ill?" she added.

"Not, I believe, dangerously; at least, they have not said so; but it is a serious

attack. Some kind of congestion, they fear."

"And you will be reconciled, will you not? You will not let anything—on your side, I mean—come between you?" Muriel said entreatingly.

"No, indeed I will not," he answered eagerly. "Thank you for caring," he added more formally.

"Caring? But of course I care. How should I help caring?" she cried impatiently.

They had moved on together, and were standing now beside the lake edge. The lapping of the water sounded distinctly at their feet; the broad mere, growing momentarily more distinct, seemed to lengthen and widen as the light slowly widened out of the east. A certain solemnity—the solemn beginning of a new day—brooded upon the water and upon the sky; the weedy margins near them

were touched with a pallid iridescence, straying in faint meanderings in and out of the reeds, and along the wet edges of the pebbles.

Suddenly Halliday turned towards her.

"Tell me," he said abruptly, "did you mean that? Did you really mean what you said yesterday?"

"Certainly I meant it," she answered indignantly.

"You are sure? quite sure?"

"Of course I am sure. Why do you ask me?"

"Because at the time it appeared impossible, and since then the more I have thought of it the more I have thought that you did it for my sake—from a feeling of pity. Of course, I love you—you know that very well; I have loved you ever since that second time we met. But, what then? Other men have loved and failed, why should I not

fail? What right have I to expect any better fate?"

Muriel smiled a little. There was something almost laughable in a man arguing with all this vehement energy against himself.

"Do you wish me to say that you are not to expect anything better?" she inquired.

"No, not that; but I wish you to be free. I wish you to choose for yourself."

"I think I am free."

"I don't know. I feel as if my love was rude and violent—as if it was carrying you off your feet—against your judgment, against your will."

"Not against my will," she said gently. "As for judgment, that is a matter for us both to decide; or, rather, for you more even than for me. Perhaps—very likely, in fact—I am not all that a clergyman's wife ought to be."

"And do you fancy I suppose for a moment that I am all that a clergyman ought to be?" he retorted quickly.

They walked on a little together along the edge. The light was growing momentarily stronger; the trees and hedges beginning to acquire edge and definition. Above their heads a feathery cluster of ash stood out in delicate relief, almost like a group of palms which some traveller catches sight of low down against a flaming eastern sky.

"I must go back now," Muriel said, reluctantly.

Halliday turned, and they walked silently together towards the house. Before reaching it, however, Muriel lingered again to look back at the wide, grey mere, on whose surface the little clouds were just beginning to be reflected faintly; at the church tower, showing its stumpy top above the line of poplars.

"Your uncle is very anxious you should take that," she said, pointing at the last named object.

"I know he is," he answered.

"Do you think you will?"

"I don't know. I feel in doubt. I have made such a desperate succession of blunders that I feel almost afraid of attempting anything new, and yet, on the other hand, I think perhaps, as he says, I should do better here than where I am."

"I think you would," she answered.

"Should you like it? Should you be happy here?" he inquired, in the tone of a man on whom a new light has suddenly broken.

"Yes, I should be very happy here. There is no place that I am so fond of as this."

They were quite close to the house now, too close for her to say anything more. She shrank, moreover, from speaking of

what had taken place there that afternoon. How discuss future plans with her grandfather—he upon whose death everything depended—lying there upstairs? The whole subject, too, was mixed up with so much that was painful and discordant, that she dreaded touching upon it. For all that, as they stood there together upon the threshold, a sudden thrill of joy—reprehensible perhaps, but hardly unnatural—shot through her as she thought of the future. The coming years, with all their tide of weal and woe, seemed embodied in that pale gleam which was stealing in through the open doorway. She felt ashamed immediately afterwards, however, of the impulse—

“I must really go back now,” she said, holding out her hand.

“I, too, must get back to Chudleigh,” he answered. “My train leaves at seven.”

For all that, they still stood several

minutes longer together. It was light enough now to see one another's faces with tolerable distinctness. Looking at Halliday as he stood in the shadow of the porch, his face half illuminated by the light outside, it struck Muriel that he was extremely pale, paler, she thought, than she had ever seen him look before. "You are not ill, are you?" she asked with sudden anxiety.

"Ill? I never was so well in my life; I feel as if I was walking on air. I feel ashamed, too—hideously ashamed. I have done nothing, and I have got everything—more than everything. Why should I? There seems no sort of reason or justice in it."

Muriel smiled again. "Don't you know that it is very wrong to rail against Providence?" she said demurely.

"That's it," he answered quickly; "I feel that if it was the reverse case—if I

was losing all that I am gaining, if I was losing you, I should rail. The injustice, the unevenness of things never struck me so forcibly before."

Muriel became suddenly grave ; his seriousness was infectious, and communicated itself to her. "You make too much of it, you do, indeed," she said earnestly. "I am not such a great prize ; I am not really."

"You are to me."

"Am I ?" She put out her hand again, and this time he grasped it firmly. Muriel did not attempt to take it away, and for a moment they stood thus, looking full into one another's eyes. Something in the expression of hers must have been decidedly encouraging, for all at once, before she had even begun to realize his intention, she found herself in his arms. It was only an instant, however ; another, and she had disengaged herself again.

"Now go," she said gently.

"Yes, I will go ; but I will come back again. May I not ?"

"As soon as you can ; the sooner the better. You will find me waiting for you here."

"Good ! I will not be long," he answered, his voice ringing joyously out as he strode away up the poplar-bordered path leading to the high road beyond.

CHAPTER IX.

A CONCLUSION.

FOR all that, he was—very long. The next morning Muriel received a note informing her that he had arrived, and that his father was better—a brief note, written, she fancied, in some confusion or agitation of mind. After that nothing—not a word ; not a line ; not a syllable. As far as any sign of life was concerned, Stephen Halliday might have vanished bodily from off the face of the earth ; sunk, like the ill-fated hero of Ravenswood, into the devouring maw of a quicksand, or disappeared by means of some of the various other picturesque forms of catastrophe to which

heroes of romance seem peculiarly prone. Happily for our heroine, she was too busy, particularly at first, to be able to devote her whole time to speculations as to the cause of this mysterious silence. Every now and then, whenever she had a few minutes' leisure, it came back upon her with a pang; and at night she used to lie awake hour after hour conjuring up every sort of reason, probable or improbable, to account for it; but during the greater part of the day she was too much taken up with other less personal, but more immediate, troubles and anxieties to be able to expend quite as much ingenuity in the art of self-tormenting as she would doubtless otherwise have done.

Contrary to all reasonable expectation, John Flack did not die on the day which succeeded his attack, nor yet upon the day following either. He even rallied a little, so far as to be able to take a certain

amount of nourishment, and to turn in his bed with the aid of one or other of his attendants. He did not, however, recover his powers of speech, nor did he apparently recognize any one, though several times Muriel fancied that he knew her, and once, as she was helping to raise his head, he suddenly opened his eyes, and looked at her with an expression which made her think that he was about to speak; at this point, however, his eyes gradually lost their intent look, and he relapsed back again into unconsciousness. Her own time and energies were by no means entirely devoted, however, to the duties of the sick room. On the contrary, she was often obliged to leave her grandfather for long periods together to the care of Tabitha or one of the other servants, while she ran hither and thither in response to some urgent appeal from without. Old Flack's rooted suspiciousness against the human

race as a whole had always prevented his having any one in his employment who was capable, even in the slightest degree, of replacing himself; everything, down to the very minutest particular, having been always carried out under his own eye, and subjected to his own minute and vigilant supervision. When, therefore, he was struck down, it was like the mainspring of the machine being broken. Everything was at a standstill; no one knew what to do, or to whom to turn for orders, and Muriel found herself hourly appealed to in a thousand matters as to which her powers of forming an opinion or giving a direction were limited in the extreme. Of course, she had to fall back upon her uncle, who, indeed, spent the greater part of the following week at Boldre. Had matters remained as they were, or had the contents of the last unfortunate will not been so prematurely divulged, nothing could have

been more satisfactory than this. Thomas Flack would, as a matter of course, have seen to the proper ordering of what he would have regarded as likely in the course of a few days to become his own property, while Muriel, in her department, would have had the comfort of his substantial presence to fall back upon in case of need. As matters stood, however, all this was at an end. Do what she would, she could not shake off or forget the shock of pain and surprise which her reception on the evening of her arrival had occasioned ; while, on the other hand, even the knowledge that he was not to be a pecuniary loser by his father's extraordinary perversity, could not prevent Thomas Flack from feeling all the disgust and anger of the son who finds himself unexpectedly disinherited in favour of some comparatively remote and hitherto unlooked-for interloper. Nothing, therefore,

could be less comfortable or more constrained than their relations. Instead of taking the whole of the outdoor concerns upon himself, as he would in any other case have done, Thomas Flack made a point of reporting everything to Muriel, and punctiliously requiring her approval, despite her repeated assurances that she knew and could know nothing about it, and depended wholly upon his judgment and experience. He did not, however, offer to remain at the farm, nor did Mrs. Flack appear again upon the scene for several days after the events recorded in the last chapter. Although this latter omission could not be said to be any particular or poignant source of regret to Muriel, still the sense of her own loneliness—of having none of her own kith and kin near her, and no one but the farm servants to depend upon—became after another night so strong that

she determined to send to London for her Uncle Hal, and accordingly despatched a letter, containing the necessary remittance, requesting that he would come down with as little delay as possible. After all, she thought, he was as nearly related to the sick man as any one else in the world, and had therefore a clear right, apart from her own wishes or requirements, to be upon the spot whenever that—which obviously could not now be very long delayed—took place.

When, however, he did appear, with his feeble, shambling gait, and his pallid eyes questing vaguely round at scenes, once so familiar, now for years past well nigh forgotten, Muriel felt all at once disposed to regret her own precipitancy, and to think that she had done a foolish, if not, indeed, a cruel thing in summoning poor Hal from his usual haunts, and exposing him to such adverse criticisms as he would be

certain to encounter here. This seemed, indeed, the little man's own view of the matter. He had been so long in one spot, and had grown so completely part of his own peculiar *milieu*, that he evidently regarded himself as somehow or other in danger away from it, and shrank—much as some hermit crab newly deprived of its shell shrinks—from every fresh approach as likely in some unknown fashion to prove perilous to him in his present defenceless condition. Little by little, however, as the days passed on, and no particular perils appeared, he began to recover his wits and self-possession—so far as he could ever be said to possess either—and even to experience an unwonted satisfaction in renewing his acquaintance with what evidently commended itself highly to his attention as a perfect mine and treasure house of delightful curiosities. Nothing, however, would induce him to enter his father's

room, or even, if he could avoid it, to approach the door, so that in a practical point of view Muriel could not be said to reap any particular benefit or aid from his society. Had she been in the humour to be amused, she could hardly have failed to find entertainment in watching the meeting between the two long separated brothers. It really seemed barely conceivable that the big, handsome, broad-shouldered man, who even now hardly appeared to have passed middle life, could be the brother, and moreover the elder brother, of the little wizened, dilapidated-looking being whose wrinkled face, cracked voice, and thin grey hair were more like those of a man of seventy than of fifty. It was evident, too, that Hal's appearance on the scene was anything but a source of unalloyed joy to the other and more prosperous members of the family, so that in more ways than one

poor Muriel was made to feel that she had again done the wrong thing, and had simply added another to the already tolerably crowded confusions which surrounded her.

All these various and conflicting anxieties were enough, it will be seen, to distract her attention—at all events for a time—from dwelling upon Halliday's mysterious silence. They could not, however, prevent her from recurring to it again and again, and losing herself in conjectures as to its cause and probable continuance. Could he be ill? she wondered. He had certainly looked ill, she fancied, on the morning they had parted for the last time; or could it be again, that his father had exacted as a pledge of their reconciliation that he should give up all engagements contracted previous to that reconciliation? When this idea first occurred to her, Muriel thrust it hastily away again, as an insult to

Halliday, and a folly unworthy of a second thought, but to thrust an unwelcome idea away by no means ensures that it will not speedily come back again, and amongst the many more or less probable conjectures which occurred to her from time to time, this was not, it may be said, the one which presented itself seldomest. Of course, the simplest thing would have been to apply direct to the Beachamps for information ; but against this again there were obstacles. On what grounds could she ask for such information at all, without first telling them of her engagement? and yet to do so—to be the first to tell what Halliday had evidently either not found time or had not chosen to reveal—was a piece of self-assertion from which she shrank. How could she tell in what light they might be disposed to regard it? How could she tell whether she would be welcomed amongst them or not? Nothing certainly could have been

kinder, or more flattering, than their manner to her while she was under their roof ; but then to be welcomed as a guest, and as a tolerably near relation, was obviously not the same thing, and in any case it was clearly Halliday's business and not hers to reveal it. If she could have seen Lena Beachamp alone she felt that she might have spoken of it ; for curt and repellent as was that young lady's ordinary manner, Muriel had not been nearly a week in the house with her without discovering that beneath this manner lurked qualities which handsomely repaid the labour of attaining to them. At last, one morning, having spent the early part of the night with her grandfather, she got up after a few hours' sleep, so harassed and miserable, so distracted with a thousand conflicting fancies, all of which seemed to have suddenly assumed gigantic proportions, that she did resolve upon sending a note entreating

Lena as a favour to come and see her, if only for a minute. That very day, however, a sudden change for the worse declared itself in the patient, and it soon became apparent that the end was not far off; indeed, before another twenty-four hours had passed it was all over, and Boldre Farm had lost its master.

Of course, in the fuss and confusion which immediately ensued, it was impossible for Muriel to take any further step in the matter, not to speak of the obvious impropriety of asking Miss Beachamp to come to the house under the circumstances. One of the minor results of old John's death was that his son Hal took to his bed from alarm and dismay, and general nervous derangement, and was not to be induced for some days to leave it, so that Muriel had him also upon her hands, and had to administer soothing potions, seasoned by daughterly lectures, as to the desirability

of acquiring some degree of proper self-control. In one respect she was not sorry, however, for this sudden collapse of poor Hal's, since it kept him out of the way during the funeral, and the highly exciting and unpleasant scenes which immediately followed that event. Another uncle, a well-to-do sales-master from Glasgow, now made his appearance on the scene, and there was also a sprinkling of other, and more or less distantly connected relations of the family, and a good deal of eating and drinking, and the usual subdued but not unpleasurable excitement which attends a funeral in the class to which the Flacks belonged. When the will came to be read it turned out that in addition to the house and the lease of the farm, there was a rather considerable sum of money in the bank, of which no one seemed to have known anything, and which was also bequeathed to

Muriel ; indeed, with the exception of a few trifling legacies to the Strongs and others, everything of which the old man died possessed forthwith became the property of his granddaughter.

There have been many wills which from time to time have afforded dissatisfaction, but it would be difficult perhaps to instance one that more effectually succeeded in offending and displeasing *every* one without exception concerned in the matter. Several of the relations, including the uncle from Glasgow, loudly asserted the necessity of setting it aside altogether, and proceeding on the assumption that John Flack had died intestate. As far as Muriel was concerned, she was perfectly willing that they should do this, or anything else that would enable her to escape from her present odious position. It was not so easy to escape from it, however, as it seemed ; for even if she relinquished

every shilling to which she could legally lay claim, the question still remained—To whom was the money to go? Obviously it ought not all to devolve upon Thomas Flack, who already was the monied man of the family, indeed the uncle from Glasgow was not slow in putting his veto upon that mode of disposing of the difficulty, and then, again, there was poor Hal. Was he to be altogether left out in this redistribution of the family property? So confused did Muriel at last grow as to the rights and wrongs of the whole matter, so perplexed amongst the various conflicting claims, and so overwhelmed at the responsibility thus ungraciously thrust upon herself, that in despair she wrote for advice to her own lawyer, a kindly old gentleman, who had always shown a fatherly interest in her concerns, and who, she thought, might be trusted to help her in her present dilemma. This letter produced a response

in the person, not of her old friend himself, but of a certain grizzled, but by no means elderly, Mr. Grimshaw, a junior partner in the firm, who forthwith began to take possession of the situation from his own point of view, and in whom Muriel soon found that she had only brought a fresh antagonist into the field. Hitherto, though every one had been opposed to any suggestion which she had ventured to make, every one at least had been agreed as to the obvious propriety of her forthwith proceeding to strip herself, in order to remedy the injustice of which John Flack had been guilty, and redistribute the means thus unwarrantably heaped upon herself, to other and more lawfully entitled recipients. Mr. Grimshaw, however, entirely dissented from this view; indeed, he seemed to regard Muriel herself as very little short of criminal for so much as contemplating

it. Had Miss Ellis ever considered the paramount rights of the testator in the matter? he inquired severely. Had she realized, too, the injury she was doing, he would not say to herself, but to others, whose interests were, or at some future time might be of importance to her, and who, he ventured to say, would have every right to reproach her if she allowed weakness or an ill-judged generosity to overpower her now? However much Muriel might personally dissent from this reasoning, it certainly suggested new and not unimportant grounds of consideration. Had she any right to sign away what, after all, was now not so much her own as Halliday's? she asked herself. But then, where was Halliday? Why did he not come and stand by her in this strait? Why did he leave her all this long time without a word? From everything she knew of him she felt certain that he would be as anxious as she

was to surrender what, in her own, as well as in other people's judgment, ought never to have been hers at all. No one certainly could have exhibited a more Quixotic indifference to money than he had always done. At the same time there was no doubt that as matters stood she was morally bound not to move in the matter until she had had an opportunity of consulting him. But then, again, when would she have such an opportunity? Was she to consider herself engaged to him or was she not? And if she was why did he not come back as he had promised? Why did he not at least answer her letters? What possible reason could there be for his leaving her in such a cruelly protracted state of uncertainty? These questionings, joined to the continued pressure from without, became at last so peremptory that about a week after her grandfather's death she did at length despatch a note to Lena

Beachamp, entreating that if possible she would come and see her within the next few days. This note produced an immediate response in the affirmative, and the next afternoon Miss Beachamp appeared, having ridden over from the Manor by herself.

Muriel met her at the entrance, and led her into the hall or outer kitchen, the only sitting-room in fact in the house, the smaller ones, of which there were two or three, having been long ago converted into receptacles for the various odds and ends of lumber which accumulate about the precincts of a farm. It was anything but the spot, however, for a confidential communication. The indefatigable Mr. Grimshaw had announced his intention of coming down again from London that afternoon. Thomas Flack, too, might appear at any moment, not to speak of the liability of incursions

from the back regions, and of the certainty of being overlooked by the entire house from above. After a few minutes, therefore, Muriel invited Lena into the little back garden, at the end of which there was a low wall, shadowed over with horse-chestnuts, where they could sit and talk at their ease undisturbed.

Up to the moment of her guest's arrival she had not fully made up her mind whether to take Lena wholly into her confidence, or merely to try and ascertain from her where Halliday was, and whether anything had been heard of him since his departure. There was something to-day, however, so unusually little brusque and repellent in the latter's manner, that insensibly Muriel found herself drawn into telling the whole story, and appealing to her for aid and sympathy. Nor did she appeal in vain. Nothing, on the contrary, could be friendlier, nothing more

affectionate than Lena's reception of the news. She even went the length of embracing Muriel—a most marked and unusual demonstration upon her part. As far as information went, however, she knew very little more than Muriel herself. No one at Chudleigh had heard anything of Halliday since his departure, but then neither had this surprised them. He was not at any time distinguished as a letter writer, while, as regards the other members of the family, they had never kept up any intimacy with them, so that under no circumstances were they likely, she said, to hear. The only fresh item of information she could contribute was that a letter, she knew, had been left for Sir Anthony on the morning of Stephen's departure, announcing his acceptance of Essant; indeed, it was only the day before that her father had remarked that the new rector seemed in no

particular hurry to induct himself into his living. She undertook, however, to write to him herself that evening, and, if this too failed in evoking a response, to telegraph, or to get her father to telegraph to one of the other brothers, inquiring into the cause of this obstinate silence. She would also write, she said, to Roger Hyde, who had left them only a few days before, and who more than any one else would be likely to know what had become of Stephen. After this there was a pause, and Muriel fancied from certain indefinable indications that another revelation, somewhat similar to her own, might possibly be in store for her. If one was impending, however, Lena either did not think the moment propitious for revealing it, or her indomitable reticence stood in the way; at all events, she remained silent. Indeed, after this, the conversation languished, Muriel being too absorbed in her own

troubles to turn readily to any other subject, while Lena, despite her really active and efficient sympathy, was not one of those women who expand easily either over their own or their dearest friend's affairs.

They got up, therefore, before long, and returned to the front of the house, where the sleek-coated Zuleika was being led up and down by a groom, under the admiring eyes of Susan, and a couple of farm labourers gathered open-mouthed at the kitchen door. Here Lena mounted, lingering after she had done so to say a few parting words to Muriel, and then rode off, turning her stately head and beautiful, dark-browed face again at the gate, to wave a parting farewell, before she disappeared behind the alders.

Muriel watched her until she was completely out of sight, and then, instead of returning to the house, wandered down

along the edge of that little stream of which mention has several times been made, until she stood at length beside the mere. It had been raining heavily the last few days; underfoot the ground felt soft and soppy, and big pools stood about under all the trees. That brilliant promise with which the autumn had set in a few weeks earlier had been falsified, like so many other brilliant promises of the same kind; already, although October was still nearly a week off, more than half the trees were bare, and those which still retained their leaves looked embrowned and saddened rather than brightened by the changing tints. This afternoon, too, though fine, was cold, with a nasty, querulous little wind which ruffled the water in broad patches, and produced an irritating effect upon the temper of everything exposed to it. Muriel was indifferent to the cold, but it, no doubt, contributed its quota to

swell that tide of angry, or rather of bitterly hurt and wounded feeling which welled up within her. Three weeks ago, three whole weeks to-day, she thought, since they had parted here, and during all that time never to have written, never to have asked or cared or thought what had befallen her! Could it be that he had never cared for her?—that she had deceived herself from first to last—and, if so, were there such things as truth or love or fidelity in the world at all? So thinking, she found that—heedless of where she was going—she had arrived at the self-same spot where she and Halliday had turned on the morning of their last eventful meeting, with the self-same branch of ash, now somewhat ragged and dishevelled, still lifting itself in feathery distinctness against the sky. The sight of this branch, and of all the other familiar landmarks, brought back vividly the whole scene. She re-

membered his look—that look with which he had turned towards her—and the assurance—strong, vivid, unquestioned—which she had read in it, and her heart smote her for her momentary infidelity. No, it was impossible; he could not have changed; no man *could* have so changed in so short a time. It was blasphemy against love—such love as had spoken in that glance—to believe that he had changed. Some explanation there was; either he had written, and his letters had been kept back, or he was ill—one or the other it must be. Oh, if only, she thought, she could go herself, and find out what it was. Suddenly a new idea crossed her mind. Why should she *not* go? What was there after all to prevent her? She had his address; what then could be simpler than for her to go—nurse him if he was ill, comfort him if he was in trouble, at all events, know the worst at once, and escape

at any cost from this dreadful, intolerable, worse than intolerable, state of suspense ?

It was not an idea to be allowed to slumber ; and before another five minutes were over, while she still stood there, her eyes still riveted upon the ash bough, Muriel's plans were already matured, and her mind made up for the start.

It was impossible, however, for her to go to-night. The last train would have left before she could arrive at the station ; to-morrow, however, by the first train in the morning, she would go, make her way to the town in which his father lived, drive to an hotel, and after that be guided by circumstances. The next question which occurred to her was who was there that she could take with her. There was something unseemly in a woman, not to say a young girl, starting alone upon such an errand ; and, little as Muriel was inclined to subscribe to ordinary conven-

tions, she shrank, like the most orthodox of her sisters, from any, even the most distant, reproach of this kind. On the other hand, who was there that would be available for the purpose? Not certainly any of the farm servants; poor old Tabitha was deaf and feeble; the shock-headed Susan a mere drudge; either of them, in fact, certain to be a good deal worse than useless under the circumstances. The only remaining person therefore was her Uncle Hal. Poor Hal, he would do anything to please her, she thought; and, so thinking, turned hastily back to the house, and went in search of him.

It was some little time before she could hit upon his whereabouts. He was not in either of the kitchens, nor was he in the farmyard. All at once, however, she remembered a small room, or rather closet, which he had lately taken possession of, and where, having first disencumbered it

of its furniture, he had begun to stick in nails, and hang up pegs, and generally convert into the likeness of that emporium of curiosities which he had left behind him in Chelsea; indeed, it was only the day before that Muriel had found it necessary to remonstrate with him rather seriously upon a decided disposition on his part to abstract everything he considered curious or interesting from every other part of the house, and to heap them all up into this one chosen receptacle. On the present occasion she found him engaged with a hammer and a bag of nails, nailing up a long uneven row of horse-shoes, and it was with all the air of a schoolboy detected in the perpetration of some forbidden piece of mischief that he turned round to his niece as she entered.

Muriel, however, had other things just then to think of besides horseshoes.

“Uncle Hal, will you do me a favour?

Will you come a journey with me to-morrow ?" she exclaimed.

Had it been an invitation to instant execution, poor Hal Flack's face could hardly have expressed more utter and woeful dismay. "A journey, Muriel, another journey?" he repeated, letting his bag of nails slip unheeded from his fingers. "Will it be a very long one?" he inquired meekly.

"No, not a very long one. It is only to——" She stopped, suddenly struck by the helpless, yet intensely expressive, look of his whole figure and attitude, and her conscience smote her. Why, in Heaven's name, should she be guilty of such selfishness? she thought. Why drag him with her merely because she happened to want an escort? How foolish and inhuman, to run the risk of unhinging those poor little wits of his which were only just beginning to recover

from the effects of their last shock ? What right or justice was there in making a convenience of poor Hal ?

“Where did you say you wanted me to go, Muriel ?” he inquired submissively.

“Nowhere, dear uncle,” she answered soothingly. “I will not ask you to come with me. You shall wait here till I come back. You would rather stay here than return to London, would you not ?”


“Yes, thank you, Muriel, I think I would rather stay here, you see, I have a good deal to do just now,” he answered, in perfect good faith, and without the faintest curiosity either as to her previous purpose or her sudden abandonment of it. “I wish though that you would tell Tom Grubbins not to forget to finish my pegs,” he added, in rather an aggrieved tone, as she was leaving the room. “He keeps on saying he will send them, but they never come.”

"Very well, uncle, I will," she answered, and escaped before any other and less easily satisfied requirement had time to occur to him.

Muriel had now made up her mind what to do. She would go up to London by the first train in the morning; drive straight to her own house, there secure the services of Eliza, and with her start at once upon her further travels. Even to see her way clear so far was, after the distractions and uncertainties of the last ten days, a relief, and before Hal was summoned from his stronghold for the evening meal, she had already made all the necessary arrangements, ordered her chaise, packed her clothes, and was ready for the morning start.

She had hoped to escape the ordeal of another interview with the formidable Mr. Grimshaw, but, in so hoping, she had underrated the energies of that distin-

guished bulwark of the law, for just as she was leaving the house he suddenly stepped out of a fly, having come down from London, he informed her, by a night train, and she found herself condemned to spend another half-hour listening to his expositions as to the duties and responsibilities of inheritors, and the perils incurred by the wilful neglect of them. The result of this naturally was that she lost her train, and had to travel by a later and slower one, so that it was already four o'clock before she reached her own house. She did not expect to find her sister-in-law there, having received a letter from her a few days before (the first, by the way, which Mrs. Skynner had found time to write since they parted), informing her, amongst other items of personal information, that she had yielded to the oft repeated invitation of a delightful person—a former Tooting acquaintance—



and had consented to spend some days at her house.

It was a much more serious matter to Muriel to find that neither Eliza nor the cook were at home when she arrived. They had gone out, the startled kitchen-maid averred, only five minutes before, but where to or when they would return she could not, or at any rate did not, say. It was bitterly disappointing, Muriel felt, to be balked by such a trumpery obstacle, and she vehemently reproached herself for not having bethought her of the need of despatching a telegram so as to secure somebody being upon the spot when she arrived. Would it not be better to start alone, rather than risk losing another day? she thought, as she stood hesitatingly upon the doorstep; having come up to London, however, for the express purpose of securing a companion, it seemed rather ridiculous to turn round now and go back without

one; resigning herself therefore to her fate, she dismissed her cab, and entered the house, to wait until her scattered household might be pleased to reassemble. Passing through the hall, she looked anxiously round for letters, having cherished a vague but perfectly illusory hope that something might be there from Halliday. The only letter, however, beside the inevitable bills, was one from Mr. Wygram, bearing an American postmark. This she took up and carried away in her hand to read.

Mrs. Skynner had often complained of the disadvantage of living in a house where there was no drawing-room, and to-day Muriel felt rather inclined to echo that complaint herself. She would have been glad, she felt, to find some corner in which to sit down and read that letter, not charged and overcharged with certain impertinent reminiscences, which just then

she would have been glad to dismiss. The downstairs sitting-room since her sister-in-law's advent she had never sat in, and did not care to do so now, while her own studio was exactly the place of all others where those reminiscences clustered thickest. In the end, however, it was in the studio, and even in the self-same chair in which she had sat to listen to Mr. Wygram's appeal, that she now seated herself to read his letter.

It proved—as, indeed, she had pretty much expected before opening it—a continuation merely of the tone he had adopted at the close of their last interview—a resolute effort, namely, to put matters back to their original footing, and to convince Muriel that if her obduracy had robbed him of a great hope, it had, at any rate, not been allowed either to spoil his life, nor yet to deprive that life of the consistency and

effectiveness which had made him the man he was.

It was with a feeling of satisfaction, and yet with a sigh, that she at last put the letter back again into its cover. How reasonable he was, she thought, how strong, and wise! Oh, if only she, too, could emulate his reasonableness! if only she, too, could feel that, come what would, she would still have something left—some standing-ground, no matter how small, on which to set about rebuilding her life. Alas! she knew only too well that it was not so. In the homely old phrase, she had put all her eggs into one basket, and if the basket fell, there would be nothing left. If this one great hope—which seemed now to have been only presented to her lips in order to make the after-loss the greater—if this was to be snatched away, swept into the limbo of the things that might have been—what would remain?

To what else could she turn? Where else was she to find the materials for building up even such a tolerable and colourable semblance of content as every reasonable man and woman must find for themselves or die. Die? It did not even seem to Muriel in the least likely that she would die. Such a solution—the first that is generally supposed to occur to the love-lorn maiden—did not so much as distantly assail her imagination. Looking, on the contrary, into the future, the years seemed to stretch in long, long leagues before her, but grey with a greyness like that of a November dawn; a greyness which appeared to colour thought, and work, and life itself. Halliday had talked of his own career as a failure, but what would hers be in such a case? she wondered.

She had been sitting for perhaps half an hour in the same attitude, with her

hands clasped in the same despondent fashion in her lap, when a light tap came to the door, and the sound of a subdued laugh was heard outside. Muriel was not long in recognizing that laugh, and a vivid recollection came over her of the day—not really so long ago—when she had returned from the New Forest, and that Kitty King had come in as she was sitting brooding alone in the studio, and had routed the blue devils, and restored her to self-content by the mere contagious force of her own good spirits. Alas, it was beyond the power of Kitty, or any number of Kittys, to restore her to contentment now, she thought, as she turned rather wearily round to welcome her friend.

The face which presented itself in obedience to her summons was, if possible, even prettier and more irradiated with smiles than the one which had pre-

sented itself on that occasion. Instead, however, of rushing forward, as she had done then, Kitty stood still at the entrance, glancing laughingly back at some one who still stood without. "May he come in?" she said, holding the door in her hand as if to bar the entrance.

"He? who is he?" Muriel thought, visions of the unlikeliest possibilities presenting themselves unbidden before her mind. Could it be Mr. Wygram suddenly returned from America? Or could it—was it possible that it could be—Halliday? she wondered.

It seemed a decided anti-climax when the door was pushed a little further open, and the youthful but ponderous form, and round, stubbly head of the estimable Mr. Archer presented themselves at the entrance. For a moment the disappointment was keen, but it never took Muriel long—longer, at least, than the

time, I'm sure she'll forgive my saying that it wasn't her good word, or anybody else's good word, but simply my own perseverance carried the day. If I'd let myself be sent away, why, I should have been sent any time the last two months."

"Well, there's something in that," Miss King admitted. "You've no notion, until you try, Muriel, what a tiring thing it is to go on saying 'No, no, no,' to a person who is so stupid—so perversely and densely stupid—that he can't and won't take in what you mean."

Muriel smiled. "I dare say it is very fatiguing," she answered. "Happily for me, I've never been tried, so I can't speak from experience; but I'm quite ready to take your word for it, Kitty."

"Ah, that's because you're so clever. You know how to say it better, and so they believe you; you always did do everything better than I did," Kitty replied

admiringly. "At the same time, Muriel, I'm bound to say that I think you made a great mistake that last time," she continued, with a little meaning nod. Oh, there's no sort of use in your shaking your head at me ; Fred Archer knows all about it, just as well as I do. In fact, I'm not at all sure that Mr. Wygram didn't tell him about it himself."

"No, no, not that," Mr. Archer murmured deprecatingly.

"Well, at any rate, it's no secret ; every one in Chelsea knows it, for that matter. How you could have had the heart, Muriel, to send that poor man flying from his native land ? And now there's that beautiful studio and house, and everything shut up, and everybody says he is never coming back at all."

"On the contrary, he is coming back rather soon," Muriel replied composedly. "I found a letter from him here to-day,

written from the Yosemite Valley. He tells me that he has given up figure painting for the present, and taken to landscape, and that no one has ever done proper justice, he considers, to American scenery, so that I fully expect we shall see a big picture of prairies, or cañons, or something of that kind in next year's Academy."

"Now, Muriel, you know very well that you don't believe a single word you're saying there," Kitty said remonstratingly.

"Not believe that Mr. Wygram is in the Yosemite Valley? I can show you the post-marks on the envelope if you doubt it, Kitty."

"You don't believe that he has consoled himself with painting, or anything else, I mean. You don't believe but what he is utterly miserable."

Muriel looked grave. "I am perfectly certain that he is not in the least miserable," she answered quietly. "Mr. Wygram

is far too sensible a man to let anything make him miserable—at any rate, long.”

Miss King glanced in the direction of her own stalwart adorer, who had discreetly withdrawn himself to the further end of the studio, and was now engaged in examining a small lay figure which stood upon a shelf.

“That’s because you don’t believe in such things, Muriel,” she said in a whisper “I know you don’t, but you’re wrong—quite wrong. I used to think so myself once, but now I am sure that people *can* be in love, and *can* be wretched, and can break their hearts, too, for that matter. You may laugh at me as much as ever you choose, but I do,” she added solemnly.

It was such a very unexpected quarter for an attack of the kind to come from that for an instant it was as much as Muriel could do to reply to it.

“I assure you that I am not at all in a

laughing mood, and that I do perfectly believe in the possibility of such things, Kitty," she said gravely.

Miss King appeared to be upon the point of making some rejoinder. Suddenly, however, she hesitated—an unwonted manifestation on the part of that confident young person—and glanced for an instant in her friend's face. Whether what she saw there suggested some new idea, or whether she was simply struck by Muriel's excessive pallor, at all events she suddenly jumped up with an exclamation of self-reproach.

"It's too bad, I declare, my staying chattering here when you've only just arrived, and must be tired to death," she cried penitently. "Come along, Frederick, we must be going. I only just wanted to bring him before you heard about it from any one else," she continued, turning protectingly to that well-grown youth as

he stood towering meekly over her head. "I am going now to carry him off to see an aunt of his—a dear old lady, nearly stone blind, who thinks him an Adonis, and is going to leave us all her money if we're good. I have to keep a sharp eye on him, too, to see that he doesn't bolt away to the hair-cutter's," she rattled on. "His monomania—one of his monomanias—is that his hair can't be short enough. You'd think that for a man out of Millbank it was about short enough already? Not a bit of it. He has been assuring me all the morning that he feels it falling over his eyes, or tickling his neck, or something equally ridiculous, and as I don't want to have it said that I've married a ticket-of-leave man, I have to mount guard, and request him to cross to the other side of the street whenever we see a barber's shop."

Kitty's flow of conversation had by this

time brought them to the door, whither Muriel followed them, so that there was nothing left for her now but to say good-bye. She would have liked to ask them to stay, but felt really too unutterably thankful to see them go to be able to summon the necessary words. Whatever Kitty understood, or fancied she understood, was all summed up and expressed in a hasty but vigorous embrace ; after which—hardly allowing poor Mr. Archer time to make his own farewells—she swept him before her down the stairs, and out into the street.

After they had gone Muriel sat for some time longer, her hands still resting idly on her lap, too tired and listless to attempt to occupy herself with anything.

The short autumn day was beginning to wane, but a dull reflected glow from the river stole along the polished floor, and was repeated from a small Venetian mirror

which hung in a dusky corner. Neither Eliza nor the cook had returned, and as neither the preparation of tea, nor the drawing down of the studio blinds lay in the little kitchen-maid's department, they remained undone. A small wood fire, however, had been lighted on the hearth, so that where Muriel sat she seemed about equally illuminated by the two glows, the wide one without, and the smaller and homelier one within. Presently it struck her that the former seemed to be brightening rather than waning as the minutes stole on, so she got up and wandered listlessly over to the window to examine into the matter.

London has its picturesque moments, and the effect upon which she now found herself gazing could hardly have been wilder if a range of purple hills, or the deep declivity of a mountain gorge had lain before her instead of the placid

Thames, and the dull, orderly line of the Embankment. To the left the sky was half hidden by projecting houses, as well as by the coffee-coloured London mists, but to the right, beyond the plane trees and the bridge, the wildest diversities of hue prevailed—reds paling into rose-colour, yellows deepening into saffron, with broad dashes of greens and blues and silvery greys, while above, high up towards the zenith, the sky was crowded with great white clouds, standing range above range, height above height, mountain summit over mountain summit, so still, so calm, so majestic in their vastness, that without the change of a tint or a line, it might have served for the background for some vast scene of transfiguration.

Muriel was one of those to whom the sight of beauty is always at once a stimulus and a rest, and now this vision of clear celestial crimsons, this sudden wealth

of greens and blues and silvery greys seemed to act upon her as a charm, rousing and exciting her out of her mood of dreary self-absorption. Her own trouble seemed to lift and melt with the lifting and melting of these great aerial thrones above, and a sudden impulse came to her to go out and make her way to her favourite station on Battersea Bridge, in the hope of reaching it before the glory had altogether faded from the river.

She stopped an instant as she was leaving the house to tell the little damsel, its only other tenant, where she was going, and to leave a message for Eliza in case of her return; then she hurried rapidly on beside the Embankment.

Nearly every house she passed was closely shut and barred, every one with the faintest pretension to distinction being away at the seaside or elsewhere, and London at this remote fringe of its vast-

ness, wore much the air of some sleepy time-forgotten foreign town, whose commerce and fashion have alike passed away, leaving it dozing peacefully beside a river whose waters now ministered to other and more thriving cities lower down. This fancy passed through Muriel's brain, but she did not stay to dwell on it, her energies being just then concentrated upon reaching the bridge before the glory had wholly faded from the sky. She was too late for this, however. It had lost its brightness by the time she arrived, and though enough still lingered to gild the wet brown buttresses with a passing flicker, the best part of the show was over, and the shadows were spreading thickly. Gradually, too, as Muriel stood leaning against the parapet, that brighter impulse which had brought her out faded away, and as she bent her eyes upon the ashen-coloured tide below, she found herself wondering what had

become of it, and still more why it had ever visited her at all? Battersea bridge, late on a September evening, is not a particularly populous resort, still there were a certain number of passengers coming and going from the one shore to the other. Artisans returning from their day's work; youths in striped rowing suits, hurrying down to take their places in the boats; small children under the charge of nursery maids peeping excitedly over at the steamers as they darted by; older children clattering up and down for the mere joy of hearing the noise made by their own heels against the beams—all the usual odds and ends, in short, of a London by-way. Amongst these Muriel presently noticed a tall man coming from the Chelsea side of the river, who paused every now and then as if in search of some one. This figure was some way off when she first caught sight of it, and it did not then seem to

her that it was in the least like that of any one she knew. All at once, however, as it approached her, her heart began beating—violently, furiously. Could it be? she thought. Nonsense, no, it was not even like. She must be going mad to take such foolish fancies into her head! Yes, though—it was, it was! Another moment and there could be no further question—pale, haggard, emaciated, changed—but still undoubtedly and unquestionably—Halliday!

She sprang forward with a sudden exclamation, and at the same moment he caught sight of her; another, and they stood hand in hand in the middle of the roadway.

“You have come back!” she cried. It seemed to her at first as if it was the only thing she was capable of saying. “You have come back! You have come back!” she went on repeating.

"Yes, I have come back. Did you think that I would never come? I thought so at one time myself."

She looked up, doubtful for an instant as to his meaning. Then with another startled glance at his face. "You have been ill," she exclaimed.

"Yes, I have been very ill. I have had typhoid fever."

She uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"Oh, but why was I not told? Why was I not allowed to come and nurse you? Why have I been kept in the dark all this time?" she cried indignantly.

"Ah why, that was exactly what I was coming to tell you." Halliday paused, putting out his hand to the parapet as if to steady himself. "There is so much to explain," he said, smiling rather faintly.

Muriel was too startled, however, by his looks to care to listen to any explanations then. "I know there is, but you must

not attempt to explain anything now," she said authoritatively. "You must not stay here another minute. You must come back directly to my house. Surely you are not walking?"

"No; I came in a brougham—Hyde's brougham. He insisted upon my taking it. It is waiting for me there at the end of the bridge. They told me at your house where you were, so I came on at once."

"Very well, then now you must come back at once. You are not fit to be walking or standing about. Do come, please," she said, laying her hand entreatingly upon his arm.

He still resisted, however. "What can you have thought of me all this time?" he said.

"I thought—everything that was bad; or rather, I did not, I only tried to. But I will not listen to a word—not another

syllable here. You must not open your lips again until you are indoors."

In effect it was not until they had reached the house, and even then not until she had established him upon the studio sofa with a pile of cushions under his head, that he was allowed to proceed with his story.

"As usual my efforts at usefulness were crowned with the most brilliant success," Halliday began. "I went off, as you know, by way of looking after my father, and possibly making myself of some little use to him, and the first thing I did was to fall violently ill myself, and to have to take to my bed. Naturally, my half-brothers were considerably disgusted; in fact it was rather against their wishes I fancy that I was sent for at all, so it didn't mend matters as you may imagine, my falling ill on their hands like that. I entreated to be sent off to a hospital out of every one's way, but they wouldn't hear of

that, and instead an old woman was got in to nurse me—such an old woman—the veriest old Gamp that ever plagued a sick man.”

“But surely you had a doctor?” Muriel exclaimed.

“Oh yes, I had a doctor—two, in fact, at one time. I was pretty violent, I believe, at first; but that stage didn’t last long, and when I began to come to myself, naturally the first thing I did was to ask for letters—feeling sure that you had written. Would you believe it, that wretched old woman declared that there were none—that nothing had come for me? It was her way of keeping me quiet, I suppose! Certainly it very nearly succeeded admirably, for shortly after that I got a relapse, and this time but for Skellett, I must have died.”

“Mr. Skellett? How did he know you were ill, I wonder?”

"I can't think. I never have been able to find out—unless it was by instinct. At any rate, he came; routed the old woman; took possession of me; nursed me like a mother; never left me day or night; insisted that I was going to live when the doctors declared that I was going to do nothing of the kind. In short, brought me round triumphantly; and here I am, you see, as well as ever."

"Not quite that," Muriel said, smiling rather tearfully; "but still you are alive—that is the chief thing."

"Alive? Oh, yes, I am alive—very much alive," he answered, stretching his arms out wide as if to test the fact. "Thank God, I am," he added more soberly a minute after.

"But why did you not ask Mr. Skellett to send me a line?" Muriel said, still a little reproachfully.

"I did."

"I never got it then."

"No, because he confessed to me afterwards that he had never sent it. The truth was, he was not at all sure that the whole thing—about you, I mean—was not an hallucination on my part; and, to be perfectly candid, I began to think so myself. You know, I always told you that I had my doubts about it, and when day after day passed, and no letters arrived, I began to think that I must have dreamt the whole thing from beginning to end."

Muriel clasped her hands.

"Oh, but how dreadful, how cruel of you!" she cried. "Latterly, it is true, I have not written—it seemed so useless; but at first I wrote—oh! nearly every day."

"Yes, we found the letters at last—a regular bundle of them—only four days ago, though. They must have been simply stuffed away into a drawer as fast as they

came—at least it was there that Skellett found them. When once I got them, you may believe they couldn't keep me very long in bed. Hyde had just come down, having found a letter from Skellett at his rooms, and when he found that I was bent upon getting to you by hook or by crook, and that poor little Skellett was going wild with fright about it, he undertook the whole charge of me, and brought me up to-day, and started me off here, and if I hadn't found you we were going down to Norfolk to-morrow."

"And I was going to Lancashire to-morrow," Muriel said, blushing.

"And we meet on Battersea bridge!"

"Yes, we meet on Battersea bridge. I shall like it better than ever now."

After this they were silent for a while; Halliday, on his side, gazing up at her from his sofa as if he could never gaze enough. Now that the first excitement

of their meeting was over, Muriel could see how much the fever had reduced him. He had always been thin, but now his clothes seemed literally to hang upon him, and his face was as gaunt as a wolf's. His eyes, however, had a look of life in them which reassured her. There was nothing at all dying certainly about the glance which rested on hers.

"You have not told me anything yet about your father," she said, turning her own away at last. "Is it all right between you?"

"Yes, I think so. He was very kind. He came in several times to see me—after he got better himself, I mean—and yesterday, before I came away, I told him all about you."

"Yes; and what did he say?" she inquired breathlessly.

Halliday smiled. "What do you think he is likely to have said?" he asked.

"How can I possibly tell?"

"Well, he was astonished—extremely astonished. Naturally, any man would be."

"I don't see that. But afterwards—what did he say afterwards?"

"Afterwards, well afterwards he made me tell him everything about you—about your brother, you know, and all that. I told him too," Halliday went on, "that he was not to give us any money—that that, in fact, was part of our engagement. I was right there? that really was what you wished, was it not?" he added, struck by an indefinable something in her expression.

"Yes, indeed—quite right," Muriel said eagerly. "Only I am afraid," she continued penitently, "I am afraid I have been doing all sorts of foolish and imprudent things since I saw you. I will not trouble you with the details now, but you must please promise not to be very angry with me if you find that I have

seriously compromised your interests. That is not my own expression, but Mr. Grimshaw, my lawyer's. He kept on assuring me, again and again, that any one I married would simply never forgive me for the way I have been behaving."

Halliday laughed. "Is that all?" he said. "I was afraid that it was again I that had done something wrong." Beyond this he did not express any further curiosity as to the nature and extent of Muriel's alleged misdeeds, indeed, his expression, as he lay back amongst his cushions, was that of a man too utterly steeped in content to have any misgivings left upon that or any other subject whatsoever.

"You must tell me when I ought to go," he said at last.

"Yes, but I do not think it need be yet. You are not going all the way to Whitechapel to-night?" she added anxiously.

"No, I am staying with Hyde—at his rooms. You know all about Hyde and Lena, by the way, I suppose?" he added, lifting up his head again to look at Muriel.

"I do not know. I only guess," she answered, smiling.

"Ah well, I dare say you have guessed right. I only hope that she won't box his ears too vigorously, that's all—morally, I mean, of course," he added, laughing.

"No no, I am sure she will not. Why should you imagine it? She is so good. She was so very good and kind yesterday when I told her about—about us."

"Good? Oh yes, she is good—good as gold, and honest, too, as the day. But still, as a wife—and as the wife of Hyde, of all men upon earth!"

"And then she is so beautiful," Muriel said remonstratingly.

"Yes, she is very handsome, of course. I suppose that is it; but still——" Further

than this he did not, however, elucidate his views as to the chances of Hyde's future felicity, but lay still instead, his eyes questing curiously over the walls and around the room, taking in all its various artistic appliances, its shaded lights, and multifarious easels, and palettes, and paint-boxes; its big easy-chairs and Persian rugs, and picturesque odds and ends of various kinds.

"Shan't you miss all this terribly?" he suddenly inquired, turning round to Muriel.

"Miss what?" she asked, not immediately perceiving the drift of his question.

"Why, all this"—waving his hand comprehensively round the room, and then in the direction of the distant lights and the river—"your studio, and artistic properties, and friends, and everything? We can't take it all down with us just as it stands to Norfolk, can we?"

Muriel, too, glanced round the room,

and for a moment her face certainly fell as she looked at all her cherished possessions ; only for a moment, however. "Never mind, I can do without it perfectly," she said quickly. "I can indeed," she added eagerly, turning to him and smiling.

Halliday, however, did not smile ; he sat up on his sofa, looking, on the contrary, extremely serious. "I don't believe you have one bit realized what you're doing," he said gravely. "I dare say now—being the woman you are—the mere fact of my being such a scarecrow—such a sickly-looking skeleton as I am—may make you inclined to like me all the better. But how will it be later ? How will it be when you find yourself stuck down for life in the depths of the country, without your friends, or your pictures, or any of your pretty things, with nothing in life but a dull clod of a husband who

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talks to you about his fights with his churchwardens, or the fall in the value of glebe lands? Don't you think that you will begin to repent then?"

She shook her head. "Not even then," she said smiling. "Besides, you need not flatter yourself that I am going to leave my paint-brushes behind me," she continued playfully. "I am going to take them all down with me to Boldre; Boldre is extremely paintable."

"Oh yes, Boldre. But now supposing I was to take into my head—and you've no notion what an obstinate brute I can be when I try—supposing that I was to take it into my head that I ought to go and live—goodness knows where—in the Black country, we'll say, or somewhere equally enjoyable? What would you do with your paint-brushes then?"

"Then I should do without them," she answered. "There are more important

things in the world than even them." She got up and went over to the sofa, looking down at him as he lay there.

"Now that you are back, I think I could make up my mind to do without—most things," she said simply.

"Without Art, and Cheyne Walk, and Chelsea?" he inquired, stretching out his hand and looking sceptically up at her.

"Without—well without Cheyne Walk and Chelsea, certainly," she answered, laying hers in his with a smile.

THE END.







